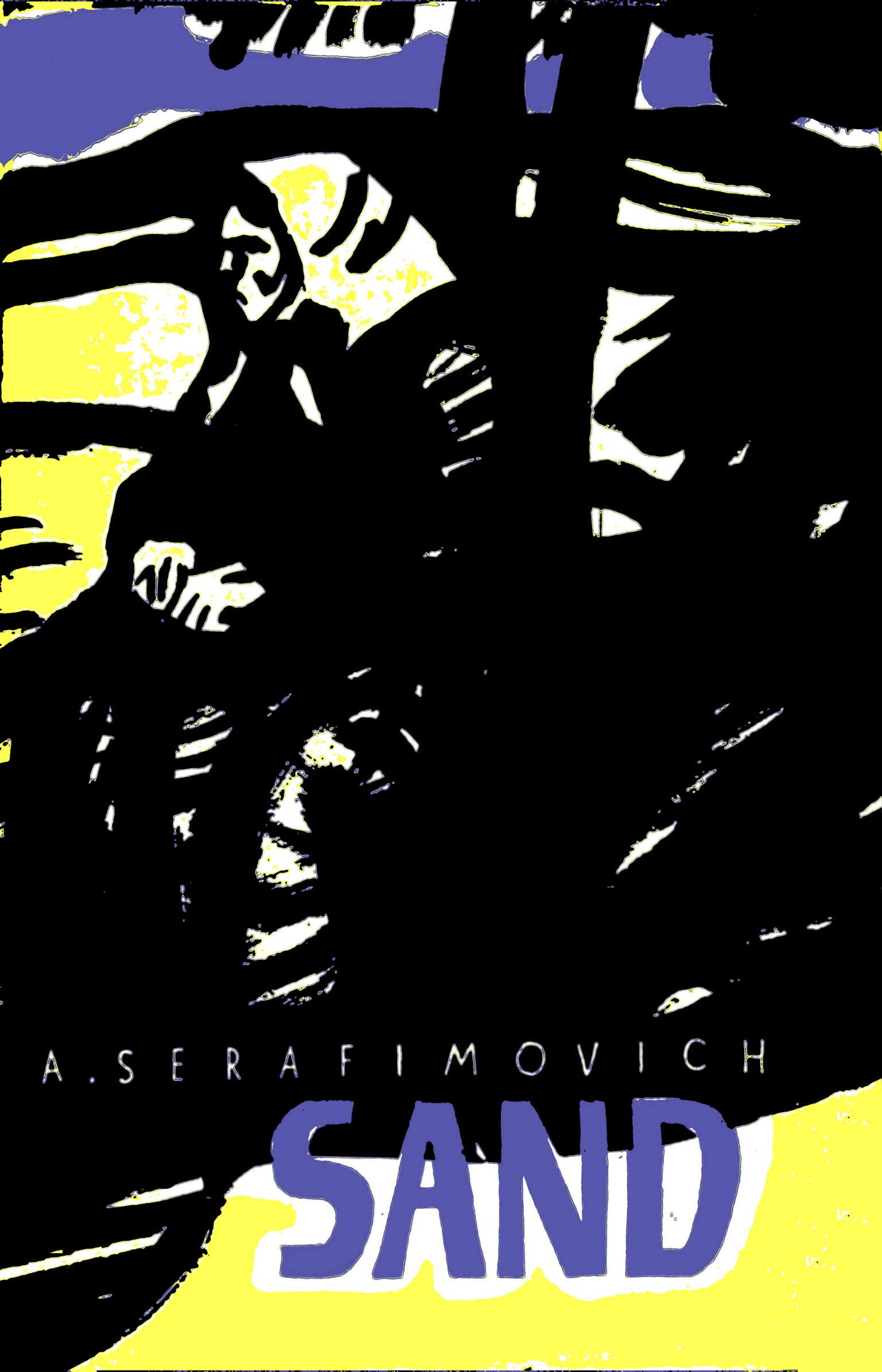

A. SERAFIMOVICH

SAND

"Serafimovich was a great man, a real artist whose stories are near and dear to us; he was one of that generation of writers from whom we learned in our youth."

Mikhail Sholokhov

Alexander Serafimovich was born in 1863 in the don region in the family of an army clerk. The boy was twelve years old when his father died and the family entered a period of "unflagging poverty." Young Alexander became the bread-winner, earning money by tutoring young boys while still continuing his own schooling.

In 1883 Serafimovich entered the Department of Physics and Mathe-matics at St. Petersburg University. Here he became an active member of the revolutionary circle led by Alexander Ulyanov, the elder brother of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin; Ulyanov and Serafimovich became close friends. When the tsarist authorities executed Ulyanov after the assasina-tion of Tsar Alexander III, Serafimo -vich wrote an appeal to the people for whihc he was arrested (1887) and banished on the shores of the Arctic Ocean.

While in exile Serafimovich made the acquaintance of exiled professional revolutionaries and, as he himself says, "graduated his second Marxist university." It was in Mezen also that he first began to write.

His first story "On the Ice" was published in 1889. "Spelindid language, full of imagery, terse and powerful, the descriptions bright and lucid." was V. Korolenko's opinion of this story. Maxim Gorky also had a very high opinion of Serafimovich's short stories many of which he published in the magazine *Znaniye (Knowledge).*

In addition to a selection of Serafimovich's short stories the present edition offers the reader two longer narratives, one of which, "Sand" aroused the admiration of Lev Tolstoi. On the margin of his copy he gave full marks for the book.

In Serafimovich the reader is captivated by his profound sincerity and veracity. Speaking of his own writings he says "... I have always been disgusted with everything in literature that runs counter to the truth."

Alexander Serafimovich die in 1949 at the age of 86.

A. SERAFIMOVICH

SAND

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Серафимович

ПЕСКИ И ДРУГИЕ РАССКАЗЫ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА

SERAFIMOVICH

SAND
AND OTHER
STORIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY GEORGE H. HANNA

ILLUSTRATED AND DESIGNED BY M. KLYACHKO

CONTENTS

1. GALINA 9
2. ON THE ICE 118
3. IN PORT 134
4. INTO THE STORM 150
5. DEAD MARCH 170
6. REBELLION IN PRESNYA 178
7. UNDER THE CLIFF 209
8. SAND 235
9. SWITCHMAN 275
10. TWO DEATHS 294

GALINA

THE CART was tossed from side to side by the ruts and the twisted roots that crawled across the road even when the bay mare, with her rubbed withers, sore back and constantly nodding head, moved only at a walk.

The forest had been cut down on both sides of the road. Either the work had been badly done or the cattle had chewed off the tops of the young trees, preventing their growth; whatever the reason there was nothing as far as the eye could see but blackened, split, mossy stumps, miserably overgrown with stunted bushes.

Chattering magpies made bright patches as they flashed past under a low, grey sky.

With fingers that peeped out of her torn gloves, Galina held on tightly to the shaking cart rail, pulled her tongue back in her mouth, clenched her teeth and gasped in her torment, so painfully was she being jolted up and down.

White-headed Mikhailo, in a torn winter cap with ear flaps, swung his bast-shoes over the front of the cart

where the mare kept banging them with her manure-bespattered legs. He was also being shaken up—his cap kept dancing jerkily above the serrated edge of the distant blue forest, but the shaking was a thing in itself and it did not concern him, he was thinking his own thoughts, or perhaps he was not thinking at all but was just looking idly at the trace rope that had caught the mare's tail and was pulling it aside—he would have to put it straight.

The fields they had passed, the tree-stumps and the peasant lad who was driving her from the station—all this she had imagined before, she had seen glimpses of it in books she had read and there were memories of villages in which she had sometimes spent the summer. Perhaps she had not read all there was in the books and had not noticed everything from the train windows on her way to summer teaching work, or perhaps it had been different on those estates where she had taught—in any case, everything here had a different look about it, silent, lonely and pensive.

As they were driving through a field spread with dung a village loomed dark ahead. On the outskirts there was a big building, black with age, with a new, green-painted roof and a group of young birch trees in its little front garden that looked like bridesmaids.

"Who's your passenger?" asked a tall, old man with a grey beard tumbling over his linen shirt. He spoke in a husky, deep sort of voice, like that of a ventriloquist, and placed a hand on the rail of the cart, a pale warty hand scored with the veins of old age.

Mikhailo tugged at the reins and kept turning round.

"I took the priest's luggage to the station. Rye is ten kopeks dearer this year. At the level crossing the mare over-reached herself, she'll be killing herself next," he said.

He spat through his teeth under the mare's tail.

"On the way back I brought the teacher," he added.

"Huh," muttered the old man nodding towards the dark building, "that's the school over there, God bless Kabanov for putting a good roof on it.... You know, Mikhailo, I went to see my son: wondered whether he'd want me or not. He told me to go back where I'd come from."

"That's how they all are now: the old people have one foot in the grave so what's the use of feeding them."

Mikhailo used his whip handle to adjust the trace that had caught under the mare's tail and then began scraping the dried manure off the horse's legs with the end of it.

"I'm going to the steward this week, I want to rent the Wet Corner."

"That's over by the forest, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh: there won't be more than an acre there, however you try to stretch it but they ask a big enough price."

"Thieves, by Christ...."

"Blood-suckers."

"They're talking as though I were just a bit of luggage or weren't here at all."

Galina was glad that the terrible shaking had stopped but she still held on to the rail as she sat there.

The deeply-rutted, single village street was loneliness itself. In the middle of a dark wet patch stood the village well and around it a flock of motionless white geese; from behind the cottages the cupolas of the church peeped out.

And now, as she had done all the way from the station, Galina surrendered herself to some sort of uniformly oppressive, never before experienced, order of things that formed part of the silence, the loneliness and some all-pervading unsolved problem, and sat there waiting, saying nothing to her driver.

"Well, there you are," said Mikhailo as he touched up the mare, "I've just bought myself a new cap."

"Well, well," said the old man, removing his hand from the cart rail, "good-bye and good luck. That's the school, over there."

They drove up to the school.

Mikhailo jumped down.

"Hi, One-Eye, d'you hear me, I've brought the teacher, d'you hear?"

He knocked on the window-sill with his whip handle.

The school with its open windows had a deserted look about it. She could see the desks worn smooth with long usage and the bare walls.

Somewhere from the empty depths came a cough, followed by heavy, shuffling steps. The geese cackled around the well.

A round-shouldered old man, who looked like a hunchback, came out on to the porch. He had a wall eye and a heavy square chin covered in grey stubble. With his one eye he glanced at the new arrival, walked heavily down the creaking steps, pulled a basket, bundle and bag out of the cart and silently carried them into the school, his elbows sticking out, and looking more round-shouldered than ever.

Mikhailo was adjusting his horse's collar.

Galina remained seated in the cart, afraid to stand up, her legs were so numb; suddenly she felt lonely and abandoned, of no use to anybody.

"Oh, Lord," thought Galina, "it's like living in a forest!..."

Then she remembered the gloomy expanses of tree-stumps.

"Why, there's not even any forest!..."

She suddenly overcame her weariness, jumped to the ground and went into the school.

It all looked forbidding: the big classroom, the smoke-blackened ceiling, the grimy desks, the blackboard with a big crack in it and behind it a fly-spotted map of the hemispheres on which the elongated shape of America gave an impression of something extremely dull.

Galina went to her narrow, high-ceilinged room. From the window she saw the same single street, the white geese around the well and the church behind the row of dark cottages.

She sat down on her roped basket in the middle of the room, her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her hands.

She had been so reluctant to leave the town, to part from her friends, from the young people with whom she had grown up during her years at school, to leave the theatres and books and those of her friends who had gone on to college.

Never had she dreamed that one day she would have to bother with these ragamuffins, wearily hammering the ABC into their heads. How could she teach them anything when she had neither the skill, the experience nor the desire?

A voice that was at once familiar and unfamiliar sounded strangely in that empty room.

"But you have to live!"

It was her own voice, echoing hollowly.

With an abrupt movement she got up, wiped a cobweb off her face and began tugging at a knot in the rope as hard as a stone.

Shuffling and stamping with his heavy boots the humpless hunchback edged his way into the room dragging a white deal table. He stood it by the window, moved it about until its legs stood firmly on the floor; then he stepped to one side, looked with his one eye at Galina struggling with the tight knot, pushed her out of the way,

and, still without saying a word, began unravelling the knot with his teeth, nodding his head as he did so. There was, indeed, nothing to talk about, everything was familiar, there was already an atmosphere of dullness that stretched away down the long dark row of months, perhaps years, of lonesome monotonous life.

Galina began enthusiastically putting her room in order. Trying them first to see where they looked better she tacked postcards and photographs on the wall, arranged her books on the table and laid out on tiny shelves the knick-knacks she treasured as a memory of her former life.

The hunchback came in again, carrying a little, verdigris-covered samovar that was boiling furiously, snorting and bubbling and spouting clouds of steam; without a word he placed it on the table. Through the window she could see cattle passing by, raising a cloud of dust as they went.

Galina looked up in astonishment, not having asked for the samovar.

"Are you the caretaker?"

"That's it," he answered morosely.

"What's your name?"

"Vasily."

The room suddenly took on a cosy and friendly air.

The first days were filled with the business of getting settled—she had to make arrangements to get her dinners and buy a stock of food.

Towards evening on the day she arrived Galina went to visit the village priest.

Some of the women she met bowed to her—they knew already that she was a teacher—others just passed her and then turned round to look at her; it was the same with the men: some raised their hats, others did not acknowledge her; the young girls did not raise their eyes but when she had gone by stopped and looked back at her.

The new church stood on a slight rise, its newly-painted cupolas staring up at the sky.

The priest's house was built in its own enclosure behind the row of cottages. Beside the house there were a garden, sheds and stables; near one of the stables lay a heap of manure, out of which stuck a shaggy head with a black beard.

In front of the manure heap stood another black-bearded man, the priest himself, a tall man in a cassock, his braided hair hanging down his back; he was proclaiming in a magnificent baritone that disturbed the hens pecking at the manure so that they, too, started their own conversation.

"What do you think you're doing here? Did I get this manure ready for you? What right have you to dispose of other people's property? Sitting there as though you were in your own house! Why, it's worse than stealing—like a thief in the night. There is nothing worse than a thief and God punishes thieves. You can be taken to court for your wilfulness and what is more, it is condemned by God. . . ."

"Father," said the head in a deep bass voice, turning its black beard towards the priest, "Father, I have sinned. I have sinned and my soul is dark. I have every respect for you, Father . . . from the bottom of my heart . . . but the pains were so bad I could neither sit nor stand. . . . The only thing to do was to take a manure bath and as you know with my one horse there's not enough manure. And so I thought that it would be no loss to you and would do me good. . . ."

"How dare you, without asking!. . ."

The head moved, the neck stretched out, the manure rolled aside and there appeared deep red shoulders, arms and at last the entire naked body of a man, as ruddy as if it had just come out of a steam-bath. Folding his gnarled hands he bowed his head and said humbly:

"I'm sorry, Father.... Give me your blessing."

Galina ran into the house.

The house smelled of freshly scrubbed floors and little children, with just a faint suggestion of incense.

There were muslin curtains in the little drawing room, flowers on the window-sills, photographs and pictures on the wall and a guitar hanging over the sofa. On a round table covered with a crochet-work cloth stood a silent gramophone with a battered horn; the shouts and laughter of playing children came from the adjoining room.

The priest's wife, corpulent after her eighth child, white-skinned and with beautiful black eyes, gave her a hearty and tender welcome.

"Come in, we're so glad you've come. We're always glad to see new people. Father will be here in a minute. It's dull here. And you're so young, Galina. You won't mind if I call you that, will you? After all, I'm an old woman compared to you. You have everything before you. Lidochka, go and call Daddy. That's my eldest, likes embroidering."

Big, deep blue enquiring eyes, unlike those of a child, looked up at Galina and she saw sadness in them as in the whole of that thin, wan face. The mother kissed her fondly on the head and the girl left the room, limping on one leg, a little braid of fair hair in which her mother had lovingly plaited a pink ribbon, dangling down her back

"She has tuberculosis of the bones... in the knee... such a misfortune. Father Dmitry will come in a minute. He's all worked up, now. That man sitting in the manure out there—only don't you tell anybody else, Galina," she lowered her voice at this point, "we trusted him, a God-fearing man who respected the priest.... Aniska, take the baby out of the cradle, can't you hear him crying?... We trusted him so.... Whenever he came we always gave him tea and on holidays Father Dmitry would offer him a glass.... Is that child wet? All right, then, change

him.... But he ... only, Galina, don't you tell anybody, not anybody, this concerns the secrecy of the confessional ... you know how a man of the cloth has to...."

Aniska, a freckled girl of about fourteen, the baby hanging in an unnatural attitude over her arm, was peeping round the door jamb.

"We had a trio of fine bays, we bought them quite by chance, lovely animals they were, and Father Dmitry's very fond of horses. One morning we got up and found the lock smashed on the stable door, the doors wide open and not a trace of the horses. You know, it was like being robbed of half our lives. Father Dmitry even wept. Then I cried, too. I said to him: you're fonder of the horses than you are of me, and he got angry and we quarrelled.... We searched everywhere for them, promised the police a reward and I even sinned—I went to a fortune-teller.... Gashka, have you put the bread in the oven?"

A voice came out of the depths of the house together with kitchen smells.

"I'm just going to."

"Well, get on with it, if it's risen.... And so we lost them. That was last year. And what do you think happened this year? In Passion Week that Bykov comes to confession and says, 'I have sinned, Father, take the sin from my soul—it was I that stole your three bays, my sin....' Father Dmitry could hardly stand on his legs he was so flabbergasted. He hurried to bless him with the sign of the cross—forgiveness of his sins—and came to me black in the face and told me. How I wrung my hands. Oh, Lord, just think of it...."

"You should have told the police."

"How can we? The confessional is secret.... You know, there's something of Dostoyevsky about it, we have to keep it to ourselves, it torments us, but we mustn't let it get out. If we say a word it'll be all over the village that

Father Dmitry betrays confessions. And so we just keep quiet about it and there he is, sitting in our manure.... Aniska, take the baby out into the yard and call Daddy. Tell him Mother is calling him. Ah, here he is."

The priest entered the room noisily, bending his head slightly to pass through the door, greeted Galina as boisterously as if he had long been acquainted with her, and taking her tiny hand between his two big, strong ones, squeezed it hard.

He was so big and handsome, with such healthy colour in tanned cheeks framed in a black beard, that it was strange to see him in a cassock.

"Come on, tell us all the news from the town. Here it's dull, here we lead empty lives. I remember when I was a student.... What about some tea, Mother?"

"It's coming. Gashka, how much longer?"

"Right now."

"I remember when I was a student.... That is, not exactly a student, I was at a Theological Seminary, of course...."

"Dmitry Ivanovich," said his wife, using his patronymic when she recalled those days, "Dmitry Ivanovich used to see the university in his dreams. In his early years he was studying all the time to enter, he was prepared to give up his priesthood and go away. And I thought... I just couldn't look at that cassock. I was still at school when I married him. Well, we came here and have lived all the time as though we were camping out... at any moment we might go away, we'd manage somehow and he'd go to the university, some new kind of life would begin, but I've already had my eighth child and it looks as though we'll have to bring them up here.... Gashka, put it here.... Clumsy, caught the cloth again...."

Gashka was a healthy-looking girl with fat, rosy cheeks so hard that you couldn't pinch them, a high bosom strain-

ing at an ugly city blouse, staring eyes and a smile frozen on her face. She pulled the cloth, which had caught on one of her buttons, completely off the table; in order to replace it she put the tea-tray with the cups on the floor.

"Are you quite crazy? Pick up the tray."

Gashka, her eyes popping out of her head with fright and a smile spreading to her very ears, picked up the tray, and her mistress angrily replaced the table-cloth.

"Do you take cream, Galina? It's awful with the servants here—did you see that monster? They smash and break everything, they can't cook or bake.... And so immoral!..."

"Hippopotamus," the priest interjected.

"... Yesterday I wanted to make a fairy cake. I was crushing apples when the children distracted me. I came back and Gashka had already managed to eat half of it—you can just imagine, raking it out by the handful and stuffing it into her mouth...."

"It ain't true!..." came a loud peasant voice from behind the door, a voice so loud that it filled the whole room. "I put that thing on the bench," for a moment a fat, perspiring face with scared, distended eyes looked round the door, "and the dog came in...."

"You've gone quite crazy!... Get back to the kitchen."

"... and pinched it."

They sat down to tea. On a dish stood a whole mountain of rosy cheesecakes, the sort that melt in your mouth; this was the work of the mistress's own hand.

The children came in one after the other, ranged according to size and stood confusedly around their father and mother, not for a moment taking their eyes off the city-made biscuits arranged separately on a plate.

The priest and his wife asked Galina about everything in the town but did not listen to her answers, interrupting her constantly to talk about themselves, about the parish, which wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the Old Believ-

ers... and then there were some Orthodox Christians who lapsed and couldn't be dragged to church with a rope —naturally the income from that sort was like milk from a billy-goat, nothing but ridicule ... in general it was hard and unpleasant making collections, it would be better if priests were paid a salary.

And about the people.... The people were all right, but they must climb over the fence into his orchard and steal apples; and they asked as much to mow an acre of his meadow as they did for anybody else's. Tough.

Mother gave the children a biscuit each, they brightened up and filed out of the room, the smallest with a white tail behind him where his shirt had come out of his pants.

As Galina followed the children with her eyes she could smell the odour of drying diapers and thought to herself:

"And that's the end.... They'll never get away from here."

Mother put the children to bed, all except Lidochka, who sat at the table watching everything with her big, pensive eyes.

They did not want to light the lamp but sat in the twilight. Through the geraniums in the open window there was a faint view of the street, cottages and black roofs outlined irregularly against the faint evening glow; through that calm and repose could be heard the barking of a lonely dog and somewhere far, far away girls were singing, their voices softened and made more tender by the distance.

"What is there new in books?" asked Father Dmitry, sipping his strong, reddish-black tea. "I remember how day-boys at the seminary used to bring in copies of *Russkoye Bogatstvo*—I was a boarder—and when we went to bed, after the proctor had been round and everything was quiet, we would pull some chairs up into a circle, throw blankets over our shoulders, light a candle and sit there

like a picture of Moses sitting in judgement. We would read and then the debates and arguments would begin, we'd forget ourselves and raise a din fit to wake the dead. Of course, we'd get caught and then the trouble would begin. They punished us cruelly in those days."

"Galina, you're not eating anything. Take some baked curds, help yourself. Lidochka, you're tired, perhaps you should go to bed?"

"No, Mamma, I'll sit up with you," said the girl and in the twilight her eyes seemed bigger than ever, as though they were staring straight into the unknown past of her father and mother.

The samovar had almost gone out but suddenly it began to sing in a thin mournful voice which made the mother uneasy.

"Where's the lid? Where's the lid?"

When she had put the lid on and the samovar stopped singing she said:

"That's not a good omen."

"Afraid of the dead or what?" asked Father Dmitry.

"Dead or no dead, you don't have to make fun of it. . . . I don't like idle chatter." She suddenly flared up. "You're always talking nonsense, Father. Let's light the lamp, it's quite dark."

"No, don't," said Father Dmitry; he got up and took the guitar from the wall, sat down on the sofa and began to tune it.

"You might at least cross your forehead," said his wife as she began clearing away the tea things.

The priest coughed, struck a chord and sang:

Midst happy valleys,
On mountain heights. . . .

The low room was filled with his velvety voice, strong but tender and, perhaps, sad.

The old, forgotten song, touching in its naiveté, had in it something of the exquisite pain of either memory or regrets, or perhaps it was because the priest, knowing the tremendous power of his voice, held it back so that the cosy little room smelling of resin and very slightly of incense, the room in which youth had passed and hopes had faded away, could contain it.

Like a young soldier on watch....

His wife's face could not be seen in the dusk as she sat beside the already cold samovar pressing Lidochka to her; her full, somewhat expansive and awkward silhouette expressed something that was either fatigue or the immobility of meditation.

"No, that will never happen to me," thought the girl, not knowing exactly what she meant by *that.*

The priest retuned his guitar and, accompanying himself with an occasional chord, sang the Viking Merchant's Song from *Sadko.*

He was no longer the village priest, the twilight disclosed the vague figure of a tall handsome seminary student preparing to enter the university. No, not a seminary student, an actor. And then you could imagine the theatre filled with yellowish faces fixed in wrapt attention, spellbound by the rich, powerful voice of the singer.

"That'll do," came the displeased voice of his wife, an ordinary, strong, matter-of-fact voice, so strong in its matter-of-factness that it drowned the voice of the singer, "it's time to light the lamp. Look how dark it is. Whenever he sings he doesn't know when to stop and tomorrow he has to go to Puzovka at dawn to collect his dues."

The lamp-glass tinkled, a match was struck and the window turned a mournful black.

The little girl was looking at her father in wonder with big, bright eyes. Father Dmitry, in a black lustrine cas-

sock that sat strangely and unbecomingly on his mighty body, hung his guitar on the wall and stroke the girl's head.

"Go to bed, Lidochka."

Galina walked home down the silent street. On the outskirts of the village dogs were barking. To her left the black outlines of the sleeping cottages hid the starry sky.

"They're very nice, both of them.... The priest's eyes are absolutely black.... And his wife finished a secondary school.... How strange it all is...."

Again there flared up that feeling of contradiction—she had somehow imagined the village priest and his wife, the white geese, the village street to be different....

"But like what?"

She could not answer the question.

From early morning the school had been packed with men, women and children. They crowded the porch as well, and under the windows there was the constant hum of voices.

It was stifling in the huge classroom despite the open windows. The women wiped their flushed faces on the corners of their kerchiefs; the men, drops of sweat hanging from the tips of their noses, ran their fingers through their damp hair.

"Please don't crowd round me. How can I write when you're leaning on me."

Galina was scarcely visible in the middle of the room with the crowd around her. She sat at a table, tired and flushed, entering the names in a lined book.

"Name? Christian name? Age?"

A woman with a horse face, pressing a little boy against the table, nodded her head with every word—just like a crow pecking—insisting on having her own way.

"Filimonka ... write it down .. that's his name ...

what? He's mischievous... worries the life out of the neighbours ... what? Yes, he's six, six years, and he'll be seven come Winter Nicholas*.... What? What am I supposed to do with him, eh? What? No husband... widow.... Out of hand... let him go to school... if he's at school during the day it'll be easier for me... have to watch him all the time...."

"Children are sent to school to learn and not to be looked after.... He's too young, I can't accept him, he's not seven years old yet."

The crow began pecking again: her nose was like a crow's beak and her head, wrapped in a shawl despite the heat, was like a crow's too.

"What are you talking about? What am I supposed to do with him? Give her the big ones.... The big kids are useful everywhere, you can send 'em with the horses, or they can work in the fields, and at home there's plenty to do, the big 'uns we need...."

"I've told you already. I'm not here to bargain with you.... According to the rules I cannot accept children under seven years of age." The crow kept on nodding. "So ... So ..." she muttered "... and your Filimon is only six. Next, please."

The woman looked at her with all-knowing, forgiving eyes, held her head to one side like a crow, turned her back on a man who was waiting his turn and, still holding the boy by the hand, bent down, lifted up her skirt and from her petticoat pulled out a dirty handkerchief tied with a double knot; pressing her stomach against the table she concentrated on untying the knots, loosened them at last and from amongst some coins in the handkerchief pulled out a ruble note, folded many times and

* Winter Nicholas. In old Russia there were two Festivals of St. Nicholas—Winter Nikola, 6th Dec. and Summer Nicholas, 9th May. (O.St.)—*Tr.*

so indescribably dirty as to be unrecognizable. She unfolded it fondly, placed it on the register and, holding it with her hand to prevent its blowing away, said in patronizingly triumphant tones:

"Here, take this."

Galina stared at her with wide-open eyes.

"What's that?"

The woman lifted her skirt and replaced the handkerchief with its double knot.

"When we kill at Christmas I'll bring you a goose, with down to make a nice pillow, even if only a little one, and I'll make it for you . . . what?"

Galina understood and not only her face but her ears turned red and her neck under her curls flushed as well.

"Get out of here! Get out at once! What do you mean by this, you ought to be ashamed of yourself." She brushed the dirty ruble off her book. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

The woman caught the note at the edge of the table and looked round, either offended or astounded, it was hard to say which.

"What are you doing? Are you drunk or something?... What are you throwing money about for?... Well off, ain't yer?"

"Go away, go away from here! Tell her to go away!"

"Get out when you're told," shouted the men standing round. "How can you do that in front of the people!... Why, you don't give money to a clerk, even, if there's anybody about.... You'd get it in the neck if you did. How can you?"

Around her table there were again those voices, men's and women's, hoarse from the winds and the fields, humble voices: Afinogenov, Taldykina, Zasuponnikov, Skoromyslov....

Where did they all come from? The village wasn't so big, they must have come from neighbouring villages....

Her throat was dry and there was a sickly-sweet taste in her mouth.

Oh, Lord, when will it end?

At last, when she had accepted fifty-four children, she said that it was enough.

The men whose children had not been accepted sighed, talked about it for a little while and then went home.

The women stayed for some time, they also sighed, some of them wept, wiping their reddened eyes, and then went away; the classroom emptied exposing the dirty, dusty floor, and still it was just as stifling. Three women remained and with them there were three girls and a boy.

Two women stood there silent and indifferent, waiting for they knew not what, but the third, a woman heavy with child and holding a dirty baby in her arms, began screeching.

"Why is this? She takes some people's children but there's not place enough for ours. Everybody knows that Froska's mother wasn't married but she took her and won't take legitimate children living with their fathers and mothers. Listen, you, making your own laws.... Plenty of you come here to teach us law and order. Why do all the rich children learn to read and write and for them that's poorer there ain't no place. It ain't as if it were a real teacher, that skit of a girl. If the shopkeeper slipped her a comb and a couple of ribbons she'd let him spend the night with her. Why did the teacher in Ulyanovka take everybody and that skit's giving herself airs—hi-hi-hi and ha-ha-ha.... What am I to do with the kid?..." and she wept angry, venomous tears.

"How dare you.... What are you talking about.... Vasily, call the elder.... Take them away!..."

"A-a-h!" screamed the woman maliciously, shaking the baby as though it were his fault, "you don't like it!... You get fat on our blood.... Got such a fine place for yourself, you can live like that for ever...."

The days dragged on, each of them exactly like the others. Every morning she saw the sun rise later and farther to the right behind the last house in the village, and send its long, oblique and cold rays into her window; every morning from the other side of the wall came shouts, screams, stamping feet and a general hubbub; and by the time she entered the classroom the air was already stagnant, thick and heavy.

Fifty pairs of eyes stared at her. She had to find an approach to them, she had to begin somehow. The visual method—that ought to be all right.

She opened a book and found a picture of a tree and held it up so that all the children could see it and said:

"Now, children, what can you see in this picture?"

Fifty children looked at the book, then at her, and sat there silent.

"What's in the picture? Come on, now, tell me. Is it a house?"

"House," answered fifty childish voices in chorus, like an echo.

"What sort of a house is it? Take a good look at it. Have you ever seen such a house? Well, what is it?"

Stubborn silence and the whole fifty of them stared at her just as stubbornly, unblinking.

"Well, what is it? A tree?"

"Tree!..." came the chorus from all sides.

"Good. Now look at this. What's this?"

They all looked at her in silence.

"Take a good look at it, you've all got eyes in your heads. What is it?"

Silence.

Oh, Lord, what dumb, wooden faces....

"Tell me, is it like a bird?"

"Like a bird!..." echoed all the fifty of them.

"What sort of bird is it? Have you ever seen a bird standing in shafts with a collar round its neck and a cart

behind it? Now I've told you, what is it?" Again they stared at her in silence, she could have killed them, but not a word could she get out of them.

"Can't you see it's a horse? Haven't you ever seen horses?"

"A horse," they agreed.

She struggled with them until she was exhausted, until she lost her voice. But still they either sat silent as ghosts or simply repeated her words like an echo.

Pedagogy, a subject for which she had been given good marks, the demonstration lessons she had given at the blackboard in the presence of the teacher and the form mistress—all that had been very necessary and very important back there at school but it was all quite unnecessary, or at least completely useless, now that she was confronted by that impenetrable wall of dull, wooden faces.

All this had nothing to do with her pedagogy, her secondary school and her eighth form. Here she had to think for herself, she had to find a way of breaking down that thick wall of ineffably stupid obstinacy.

During the recess Galina went to her own room for a moment—her head was in a whirl and she saw rings before her eyes. In the classroom an incredible hullabaloo was set up, the floor creaked and howls, screams and laughter shook the walls.

With a feeling of horror she returned to the class.

She called out a boy from the senior group who had already had a year's schooling.

"Take this and read it."

The boy tensed all the muscles of his face and began in a high-pitched voice:

"And... and... the p-p-pig... barked... at the... gate...."

"Pig? What pig? Dog!"

The boy wearing his father's jackboots frowned and looked at her as though she were a wonder.

"What's the matter with you? Who can say it properly?"

"I can," volunteered a freckled little girl, raising her flaxen eyebrows in astonishment.

"Well?"

"The goat."

"What goat? What's a goat got to do with it?"

Then the barrier that had separated her from them suddenly disappeared.

The children jumped up from their desks, climbed on to them, clambered over each other, dropped books and pens, and shouted in voices of different timbre.

"They've got a dog in their yard and it never barks at anyone unless it's a goat, if a goat comes near it always barks at it."

"Why are they all dressed in such ugly clothes?" she wondered. "There are very pretty Russian dresses, or Ukrainian, there are Ukrainians here as well. It's such an out-of-the-way hole that you can't get to the town in three years and yet they must stick the girls into ugly city blouses. Where does it come from? Why is it?"

It took her a long time to quieten the class down again. Even Vasily came in to see what was wrong, providing further amusement for the children who howled senselessly:

"One-Eye.... One-Eye ... made the little baby cry...."

During recesses Vasily dragged the children by their ears and by the hair, even kicked them but for some reason the children never complained. Galina happened to find out about it and threatened to ask for his dismissal if he as much as touched one of the children.

He did not answer but looked at her with a frown that might have meant either pity or hostility.

With that dull-witted, noisy horde she did not get through in a day one-tenth of what was required by the

curriculum. She kept the children back after school hours and hammered away at them until both she and they lost all power of reason. She ordered the most backward pupils to come to her again after dinner so that by evening her head was like a beer cauldron and she could scarcely drag herself to bed.

There was no time either to read or think.

Darkness came and with it silence, a rural silence filled with loneliness and longing.

The moment her head touched the pillow Galina fell into a heavy, dark, dreamless sleep and then suddenly, as though from a jolt, woke up in the middle of the night and lay staring into the darkness listening to the empty silence.

"Children are the flowers of life.... Who said that?... Nonsense.... People have to deceive themselves...."

She heaved a sigh. Again things were not as they should be, everything was upside down, not what she had expected. Back in the town newspaper articles and books were hammering away about the shortage of schools. There everything appeared clear and simple: every autumn many children were not admitted to school for lack of places, and that was all.

But here—a pregnant woman had brought her child, she had her own specific way of life, her own face and, apparently, her own grief and troubles: but all her very own, not like anything else, seemingly having no connection whatever with the shortage of schools.

"You get fat on our blood!" the woman had said.

"Who gets fat? Why, she meant me!... Good Lord!..."

Galina rolled over and counted up to a hundred.

The village priest also had black eyes. At first he had come very punctually and taught the catechism. Sometimes he would come in the evenings and the time slipped by unnoticed over a cup of tea and conversation.

Why had he donned the cassock? It did not suit him at

all. He must be strong, broad-shouldered.... Then he began missing lessons. He would send the sexton to ask her to take the lesson on the catechism—either he had a service in church or had to go to some other village.

He was wrong not to have entered the university.... And he had stopped visiting her. But whenever they met he was friendly and pressed her hand.... If she watched closely she could see how the ragged edges of the clouds crawled slowly across the window frame....

Then the rain began. It rattled and pattered on the roof and the wind drove the raindrops and flattened them out on the window-panes. The bare birches in front of her window tossed their heads and bowed in the wind, and through the murky rain she could no longer see the street, the cottages, the well and the white geese.

You never notice the rain in a town: it is hidden by the tall houses, the fast-moving trams, the tram-bells, the blue sparks from the overhead wires, the clatter of hoofs, the milling crowds, the patches of light from the shop-windows that find it hard to accommodate themselves on the narrow pavements—but here, the rain is the master, it hides everything. Even the rain-washed birches bow their heads and succumb. And the rain goes on and on, tirelessly pattering on the roof and the windows, battering at the walls, vague and indefinite, without a face. It is just as boisterous in the bare fields, and in the cold, empty forests, and it sheds the odd leaves that had survived on to the undergrowth amongst the tree-stumps.

The children came to school up to their ears in mud and when they left the floor could not be seen for dirt.

Sometimes the wind would carry the murky rain away and then everything looked black, the silent street with its churned up mud, the wet cottages, the black crow sitting on the well and the wet, low-hanging rags of clouds all flying in the same direction.

On rare occasions a peasant in a wet cap, with a wet beard, his coat tightly belted, would lead a lame horse staggering through the mud as close as possible to the fences. And again there was nothing but the sea of black mud in the street, the lop-sided cottages and the blackened timber of the well. And then once more the rain would cast a murky curtain over the whole scene.

Even the children who filled the short schoolday with noise and left a layer of mud behind them on the floor—even they did not disturb the sensation of sterility and loneliness, because with them everything was exactly the same, today, yesterday, for weeks and months.

It was good to read on such evenings. Galina would get into bed, move the lamp nearer and submerge herself in other happenings, other surroundings, would conjure up other images that for some reason proved particularly masterful or lifelike.

Her friends sent her books and magazines from the town, as well as newspapers, bundles at a time.

But the time came when the books lay untouched, when they were dull and lifeless. Then she was completely alone in the lonely twilight and such times gave her a feeling of horror....

Vasily brought in the little samovar, patched and green with age, rebelliously puffing clouds of steam. He placed it on the table, blew up the coals, wiped off the water that had boiled over on to the lid and then went and stood in the doorway, his arms folded, looking both respectful and dignified at the same time.

"The rain's come to stay."

Galina was glad he did not go away.

"Bring your mug and I'll pour you out some tea, Vasily."

"Thanks very much, but I can wait," he said morosely but he brought the mug all the same.

"Of course," he began, "it's this village ignorance,

there's nowhere to go, the farmers are rich but they live up to their necks in dirt."

"This man's lonely, too," thought Galina as she filled his huge, chipped mug with tea.

"Here you are, Vasily."

Vasily took the mug, looked at her with calm dignity out of his wall-eye and with respect out of the other, healthy eye.

He sat down on a bench near the door, poured some tea into the saucer and holding a piece of sugar between his tongue and his cheek sucked it and began to sip tea.

His distorted shadow formed an ugly patch on the wall.

At first Galina had not liked Vasily. She was particularly indignant when he had pulled the children's hair or ears. Now he did it on the quiet, not because he was malicious, but to maintain order, and still the children for some reason did not complain.

"There was one young teacher here, a very neat, slim young woman, she was brought to her grave by tears."

"Brought to her grave?"

"There used to be a flour mill here and at the flour mill an engineer, a smart and lively fellow, a real picture to look at. Milling's a dusty business but he looked after himself, was always clean, used to keep dusting his boots with a handkerchief. Well, he began visiting the teacher. And she was just like a candle in Passion Week, whenever he came to see her she would light up. Everybody liked her, simply loved her. You know what the people here are like, but not a word did they say against her. Then the engineer stopped coming. At last he came to say good-bye. 'Good-bye, Anna Alexandrovna,' he said. And she, how she leaned against the doorpost, in this very place." Vasily put his saucer down and leaned against the doorpost, closing his wall-eye. "And stood there as white as chalk. Then she went back to the children, she had to do her work, but she'd turn away from them to

wipe away her tears. At night she didn't sleep, there was a light in her window till the morning. Once I looked in at the window, I thought there might be a fire with the lamp burning. The curtain was pulled a little to one side and I saw her kneeling on the floor, her head on the bed and her whole body twitching.... Well, that autumn we buried her...."

His shadow was still the same, hunched up in a ball, unwillingly flickering in response to his movements.

"After that we had a man teacher, he had a family. But before him there was a woman, elderly, she liked oatmeal porridge, she'd often stand in front of the stove stirring it, from some sickness inside, it was; she lived here six months and then they transferred her. Then that youngster came, happy sort of chap, he got married. She was just as happy, a saucy girl with rosy cheeks. And the children came, and then children and more children, one every year, and the room was packed full and the teacher's wife got bony and ugly."

"That was all in this same room?"

"This same room. And the authorities began to get at him, told him to get out and find a house for his family. He begged them on bended knees—how could he keep two homes going. If one of the kids cried it would stop suddenly—they'd stuff a pillow into its mouth and it would be so quiet it was awful. I've seen everything, twenty-six years I've been here, ever since I finished service in the army."

He, too, had his story, his own life, not like anybody else's but something special: he even had his own special shadow, not hunchbacked but all hunched up in a ball and just as morose and close-lipped as he himself.

He had had children and they had died; his wife had died; all his relatives and close acquaintances had either died or gone away—one to Siberia, another to Tula, a third to Moscow, so that nobody was left in the village

and he was as lonely as an old tree-stump. He had no one to go to and nowhere to lay his head; there was no dear hand to close his eyes when his hour came. In the twenty-six years he had grown into the school, it was his home and his family and his friend. That was why, no matter how many changes there were, no matter who came, old or young, strict or kindly, girls or married women, fathers of families or lonely men, he treated them all the same, took their baggage out of the cart, carried it silently into the school, brought the samovar without a word as though they were all people he had known for a long time and with whom all topics of conversation had been exhausted.

It grew colder; everything became harder and stronger. The mud hardened and would obviously stay that way until spring, it would not thaw again before snow fell. The cottages had a more solid look about them, in the mornings their roofs were grey with hoar-frost.

The trees, too, naked and cold, were grey in the mornings, the woodwork round the well and the tops of the fences whitened, a thin layer of ice on the puddles cracked under the red feet of the geese, the barking of the dogs could be heard from afar, so clear and resonant that one felt it might shatter the air like delicate glass.

The sun did not rise very high over the cottages but it was clean and bright, without a cloud to mar its surface; it shone on the row of cottages on the opposite side of the street; on one side of the roofs, the trees and the well the hoar-frost melted, and the distant end of the street looked bluishly damp. It was like that bluish haze that comes with spring, but here there was none of the joy of spring—only the slight sadness of parting and loneliness.

"Good Lord, how is it I.... Why, the same things happen in town but I never noticed it before...."

Galina left the stuffy, foul-smelling classroom and

hurried down the street and out into the fields. The trees, the fields with their yellowed grass, the tree-stumps with the motionless red leaves of such young maple trees as still survived—in tender farewell the whole scene greeted her differently, with something of its very own, bringing with it the reconciliation of the fall of the year. The sun—it was a cold but tender sun, the last before winter.

The distant forest was wrapped in that same greyish haze that breathed farewell. As the girl walked along, trying to breathe more deeply, a voice seemed to ask:

"What do you want?"

"I want to live."

"How?"

"I don't know, but I want to live so that my heart will say, 'Good'.... Like... well... like today—it's marvellous! I've never seen such a sun before.... Perhaps it's never been like that before.... Why am I lonely?... The children shout and play, there are plenty of farmers, there are the priest and his wife, but I'm lonely...."

From the high bank of the gully behind the church there was a good view of the endless plain dotted with villages, surrounded by autumn-darkened orchards—Puzovka, Goreyinovo—many villages, and the brick buildings of landlord-farmers showing red here and there. And somehow it seemed that over there the people lived in happiness.

Shortly before the festival of Our Lady of Kazan there was a strange hubbub in the village: the church was scraped and scrubbed and the space before the porch was swept clean and sprinkled with yellow sand. The village elder sent women to the school where they washed, scrubbed and polished the whole building. The priest's house was also cleaned up and sand was strewn in front of many of the cottages. The women were baking and cooking from morning to night, the men scrubbed themselves in the bath-house and plastered their hair down

with so much oil that in the close atmosphere of the evening church service their heads looked wet.

"What's all this for?" asked Galina. "Is it the church festival?"

"No, our festival is Peter and Paul."

"It's just like Easter."

"We're going to welcome the benefactor."

"What benefactor?"

"The richest you can imagine. If he wanted to he could buy up the whole province."

The benefactor, however, did not come to the evening service, solemnly and magnificently read by Father Dmitry in a new surplice and attended by his wife in a new lilac silk frock with puff sleeves, women in new blouses and children neatly combed. The whole church was filled with the priest's melodious voice. But the benefactor did not attend.

He came next day before church. He came in an old open carriage drawn by three small dark bay horses; on the box sat his bodyguard wearing a revolver on a yellow cord. The carriage stopped at the priest's house. The priest's wife came out to meet him and they went into the church together.

Inside the church the congregation made way for him, bowing to him as he passed, and the priest, who at that moment was swinging the incense-burner before his flock, was especially generous to the newcomer leaving a big cloud of fragrant, slowly dispersing smoke, the sunbeams from the window slanting through it in blue streaks.

"Lord, have mercy upon us!..." The children's voices sang in more accord than usual—the priest had formed a choir of school children—it all reminded Galina of her childhood days, clouds of blue smoke, her dead mother and the short white dress and white slippers that she, Galina, wore in those distant days.

"So that's the benefactor!... I thought...."

He stood by the right-hand choir and sang the responses, out of tune, but with great confidence in himself. His neck, shaven at the back, with its folds of flesh, suggested the contracting business, hinted at supplies, and his hair was cut high and round, in the old Russian style.... He crossed himself furiously, sighed, and bowed a broad back in a fine cloth coat.

Galina also crossed herself because the service required it at this point—she was standing in front trying hard to look at him but could not get a glimpse of his face. Only when the long litany was over did the benefactor bow down to the ground and then, raising himself on his hands, turn and bow to the congregation. Then he again clasped his hands on his stomach and stood there with his head thrown back, the folds of flesh hanging over his collar; he sighed again, and in a whisper that carried through the whole church, got ahead of Father Dmitry in the prayers.

Galina was left with the impression of a pock-marked, peasant type of face, a fair, peasant-type beard, thick, sticky-looking hair parted in the middle and combed to both sides, peasant fashion, and eyes—the eyes she did not see.

Men and women, young and old, and the children crowded the church porch, pressing eagerly forward. The benefactor appeared, accompanied by the priest's wife.

"Welcome to the village!" shouted the crowd in chorus.

A shaggy, grey-haired old man stepped forward, bowed to the new-comer and offered him bread and salt on a wooden platter.

"In the name of all the inhabitants, Nikifor Lukich.... May the Lord bless you, our benefactor."

"Benefactor...."

"May you live and prosper.... We'll pray to the saints for you...."

The benefactor accepted the bread and salt.

"Thank you, everybody, thank you."

He handed it to a nearby woman who carried it carefully and reverently.

"Galina," said the priest's wife, "this is Nikifor Lukich, the trustee of our school.... And this is the new teacher.... Our village keeps going thanks to Nikifor Lukich.... He built the church, put a new roof on the school, rented us land...."

Nikifor Lukich took Galina's hand and she saw that his eyes were small and furtive; she made a faint attempt to pull her hand away but he continued holding it.

"All right, Mrs. Priest, don't pile the praise on too thickly."

They moved off surrounded by the crowd.

There was tea drinking at the priest's. They had invited the shaggy old man, and the shopkeeper was there with his long nose and beardless face, a face like a beer-mug with peaked eyebrows always raised—his was the only house in the village roofed with sheet iron, apart from the school. The church elder, bald-headed, yellow and palsied, drank his tea apathetically, holding a well-sucked piece of sugar in his mouth and pressing it to his cheek with his tongue.

"For the seventh month I've been drinking nettle water, I stew it and drink it. I'm a bit better, before I couldn't get my breath. When I went out with the horses I used to choke."

"Try these, Nikifor Lukich," said the priest's wife, pushing a plate of beautifully puffy, well-baked rolls towards him.

She treated them to some splendid home-made cherry wine, thick as oil, and the company livened up.

"We've been waiting for you, waiting for you as we do for Easter," said the shaggy-headed old man, looking at the benefactor with eyes moistened by the wine. "See,

as long as this church stands, as long as there is breath in any of us, we shall pray for you."

"Nikifor Lukich," said Father Dmitry, raising his hand and carefully adjusting the wide sleeve of his cassock, "Our Lord Jesus Christ said, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' These are not words of condemnation and rebuke, in them our Heavenly Teacher showed that to whom much hath been given much will be asked from...."

"Of course, much is asked," said the shaggy old man, shaking back his greyish-white mane that was falling into his eyes. "I have bought a gelding. Strong and a good worker. The way I load him...."

The priest's wife turned her head uneasily.

"Children, go to your nurse, go along, she'll give you something."

Then she turned to Shaggy-Head.

"Father Dmitry is talking. Let him finish."

"...To whom much hath been given, much will be asked from. That is what people forget, they forget that...."

"No, they don't," interjected the bald elder. "I've been drinking nettle water for seven months already and I told my daughter...."

"Be quiet, Demyanich," said the wife, making a sign with her eyebrows.

"...and blessed are they that do not forget, who remember the teachings of Our Lord, whose generosity is unflagging. The Lord has blessed the works of Nikifor Lukich, and he does not forget that everything given to him has come from on high...."

"He didn't talk like that when that head was sticking out of the dung-heap..." thought Galina, never taking her eyes off Father Dmitry.

"...and his generosity is unflagging. At his expense the church was built, at his expense the school was roofed...."

"The old roof was full of holes," Shaggy-Head said.

"When the kids sat in school," said the elder supporting him, "they could see the sun through the roof. . . ."

". . . But the greatest benefit that Nikifor Lukich has brought to our hard-working peasants is the land. . . ."

"May the Lord grant him everything he wants, he has been good with the land."

"All our lives we'll pray for you on account of the land. . . ."

The benefactor unbuttoned his coat collar and spoke in a strong, peasant voice, for some reason looking straight at Galina.

"I got every kopek with these hands. . . . I bent my back, at nights I slept little. . . ."

"We know that."

"You can't get a kopek with your bare hands."

"The kopek is a thief, it steals your sleep at night. . ." said the shopkeeper suddenly in a thin, effeminate voice, and just as suddenly the smile that spread across his face changed it so that it was no longer like a beer-mug and his eyes were mischievously merry; when he stopped talking, however, his face became long again and narrow, like that of a wolf sitting with his paw in a trap, and again the peaked brows were raised.

"That's how! . . . Every kopek by the sweat of my brow. I don't regret it. If I rent out land cheaply, I do it for our village—I give it for nothing—I lose six thousand a year or maybe eight thousand. And eight thousand, that's money! . . . But I don't begrudge it."

"We believe you. . . . Try these, Nikifor Lukich," the priest's wife offered him cheesecakes, "and some more wine."

"The governor always takes me by the arm when we go into the cathedral, the bishop sends me consecrated bread whenever I ask for it. Before I know where I am a monk brings it on a silver tray with the bishop's best respects.

I have a silver medal from the emperor himself for philanthropy."

He turned back the skirts of his coat, dived into his pocket and, looking straight in front of him with eyes that seemed to be smiling and at the same time furtive, pulled out a handful of bits of paper, receipts, acknowledgements and old buttons and a silver medal on a ribbon. Everybody took it in turn and looked at it.

"My son-in-law—he's in Moscow now, in a co-operative—he's also got a medal from the emperor, for saving somebody from drowning. They say its assay mark is fifty-six," said the shopkeeper in his effeminate voice.

The priest's wife coughed and wiped the corners of her lips with her thumb and forefinger.

"She's already used to it," thought Galina, "like a peasant woman...."

"The priest's living is difficult without a vegetable garden," said the priest's wife. "We have to buy everything and you know what the peasants are like, if they can't swindle you they won't sell...."

"Peasants are greedy," said Shaggy-Head.

The shopkeeper pulled a sad face as he bowed first to the benefactor, then to the priest, then to his wife and all the others; raising his peaked brows still higher he drank off a glass of wine.

The benefactor threw open his coat as though he were hot, pulled the sleeve a little way up his hairy arm and struck on the table with his fist so that the crockery rattled and the tea splashed about in the glasses. "I won't begrudge it!... Tomorrow I'll send Sidorka to measure off a piece of the Wet Corner beyond the river, that'll be a vegetable garden for church needs."

The priest's wife was excited and with difficulty controlled her mobile features. The priest's black eyes took on a kindly and gentle look.

"Why do they all speak so respectfully to him when he

treats them all like servants, even the priest and his wife. . ." wondered Galina.

"Many thanks, Nikifor Lukich, from the whole parish. . . ."

"That's at least a hundred rubles rent . . . a tasty morsel," said the shopkeeper, pulling a sour face, and then suddenly he smiled and his eyes again had that merry, mischievous look and his whole face wrinkled up.

"That land gets the spring floods, a real gold-mine!" said Shaggy-Head, munching greedily.

After tea they all went to the school. A crowd of men and women followed them. Small boys ran ahead of them, driving the pigs out of the way. Girls chewing sunflower seeds in the gateways bowed low as they passed.

They inspected the school. Nikifor Lukich went over the whole place, looking into every hole and corner, and gave instructions to Vasily.

"Send for a carpenter and tell him to re-hang the door on the woodshed so that the snow won't blow on to the firewood. And call Vaska Finogenov, the chimneys need repairing, the corner's all rotten, let him put everything right."

The priest's wife nudged Galina gently.

"Ask him about the school equipment, he'll do what's needed. . . . Ask him before he goes. . . ."

Wrinkles gathered between Galina's eyebrows and she felt a sort of stubbornness.

"You spoke about it yourself," the woman went on. Galina did not answer.

. . . The whole village went to see Nikifor Lukich off. Small boys, whooping at the tops of their voices, ran ahead of the horses; men and women wished him farewell and bowed to him. The three little horses pulled his carriage. On the box, beside the coachman sat his bodyguard with a revolver lanyard hanging from his neck.

That evening Galina passed by the shop. On the porch

and beside it some men were sitting; others were standing, leaning on sticks and listening.

"Not a single woman," thought Galina.

A thickset man with a rugged face covered with matted hair like the tangled roots on an uprooted tree-stump was with difficulty reading a newspaper, spelling out the words and nodding his head up and down like a horse in a tight collar.

"Our respects," said the shopkeeper, raising his cap.

The others also greeted her.

"Did you see him off?" asked Galina.

She recognized Shaggy-Head and the elder who drank nettle water and the old man who had first met her when she drove into the village and others who had brought their children to school at the beginning of the year. She wanted so much to get closer to these people, to step over that invisible line that divided her from them, a line of either shyness or aloofness.

"We saw him on his way and may the Lord go with him!" several voices answered her.

"Why does he have a bodyguard with him?"

"Wh-y-y?!" asked Shaggy-Head, sucking air in with his lips. "The people are mischievous nowadays, they might throw a brick or a lump of iron at him, or let fly with a shotgun from behind a fence. People are just wild nowadays."

"Does Nikifor Lukich do a lot of good?"

"And how! Why, he's all that keeps us going! If it weren't for him—well, you can see for yourself: if you rent land from one of the landlords for instance, it costs twenty-eight and a half rubles for a dessiatine* but Nikifor Lukich lets us have it for six. You see the difference? The floodlands that go for vegetable gardens—the landlords take two hundred rubles the dessiatine. . . ."

* Dessiatine—a land measure, 2.70 acres.—*Tr.*

"To buy it outright?"

"Phew—rent for the year, and Nikifor Lukich gives us the same land for forty.... D'you get that?"

Galina had no idea of land and land rents but the proportions mentioned meant something very big.

"Where is he from?"

"He's from here, from this village," they answered in chorus, their faces lighting up with pride and joy, "he's one of us, a peasant, that is."

"An' he was of the poorest, a ragamuffin, you might say."

"He made his money on contracts," said the shopkeeper—his face became strangely malicious and long. "He knew how to give and where to take."

"He knows that all right, you can't get away from him."

The evening was cold and Galina began to shiver but still she did not want to go away from them, she hoped that she would be able to get just a glimpse of what was on the other side of that line of demarcation that kept her from these people. The orange flames of the sunset died down and over the dark houses stood a brightly polished silver moon, still quite young.

The empty street was flooded with cold moonlight; as Galina walked along, keeping to the blue shadows, a woman with a sheepskin coat thrown over her shoulders, her hands hidden under her jacket to keep them warm, came up to her.

"Alexandrovna," said the woman, bowing to her, "be kind enough to look in at my house. My little girl's all burning up and she's as red as a beet. She won't eat, only keeps drinking and drinking, can't keep her away from the water. Step in and take a look at her and I'll bring you a pot of milk."

Galina crossed a street already white with frost on one side and entered the cottage. The foul, heavy, thick

air almost hid the red glow of the tiny lamp over which a wisp of black smoke hovered mournfully. The stove, a corner of a huge trunk and a table were vaguely outlined. Cockroaches rustled as they darted about the walls.

Their rustling was broken by the sound of noisy, wheezy breathing. Carefully, trying not to breathe too deeply, Galina bent over and saw a scarcely visible half-childish red face; teeth showed up white from behind dry lips.

The girl was overcome by a cold fear that took all the strength away from her. She tried to prevent her clothes from touching the table or the trunk. She tried to hold her breath until she could rush out of that awful house but it only made her heart beat slowly and painfully.

"Plenty of grown-ups die from diphtheria.... If I bend over her that'll be the end...."

She stepped back, pulling her dress in slightly so as not to touch the stove.

"I can't do anything here.... I'm not a doctor.... You must have a doctor...."

The woman let out a sob, rubbed her pointed nose with her fingers and then blew it.

"Can't you give her some sort of powders, deary, it may help."

She was tempted to leave the house that very minute—in the street she would be able to take a good deep breath—and send Vasily with some cough powders, there were some lying about somewhere.

"You need a doctor.... I can't do anything.... I'll send some powders...."

She raised her eyes—from the sleeping shelf on the stove three little heads looked down at her, their baby eyes shining with curiosity.

"Good Lord, they ought to be sent away..." she thought.

Quite suddenly her little room at the school with its

single window giving a view of one and the same row of houses, the well and the eternal white geese, seemed to her so lonely and empty that her heart softened. The walls were saturated in tears.

She hurriedly removed her jacket.

"After all I must get something out of life.... Some way or another, I have to live...."

She hung the jacket up near the door—it would get more air there and fewer microbes would infest it.

"Scarlet fever gives you a rash somewhere," she thought, "either on the throat or on the stomach...."

There was a little cold lump under her heart—fear. Galina began examining the girl's burning body.

"Dri-i-i-nk!..."

"Give me more light.... You don't even know how to trim the lamp... it's smoking like a chimney.... Show me your throat, girlie.... Open your mouth... wider.... Good Lord, I can't see a thing... it's as dark as the forest...."

She sat down helplessly, fearfully rubbing her hands on the bench, then got up in determination.

"Go right away to the shop and ask for vinegar."

"He won't give it to me, he'll say he doesn't trade nights."

"Tell... what's his name?"

"Ivan Fyodorovich."

"Tell Ivan Fyodorovich that I asked for it, that I ask very much.... Here's some money."

She brought the vinegar. Galina rubbed the child's body, remade the bed, and put her back. She told the woman to light the samovar, ran home for tea and sugar and gave the girl a hot drink.

"You must get the other children out of here."

"Where? It's cold in the cowshed."

"Take them to another house, somewhere where there are no children."

"I don't know about that. If it's not God's will, they won't get ill and if He does they'll get it even if you bury them in the ground. Perhaps Annushka would take them? She's alone."

They got rid of the children and then Galina set about cleaning up the place. With the help of the woman she swept out the dirt, wrapped the girl up warmly and opened the door to air the room. Galina cleaned the lamp burner, washed the glass and trimmed the wick and at last she could see the room, the big trunk, the stove, the pictures and photographs tacked to the wall—everything was visible in the clear light.

Then they went outside and sat on the porch steps.

"What's happened to my fear?" she wondered.

The cold lump under her heart had melted. Her arms and legs ached pleasantly after the work, the frost nipped her, the yard, sheds, carts, bare willow tree, fences—they all stood at the bottom of a cold, blue transparent sea, and far above that serene blue countless stars and a lonely white moon floated.

"What a bright night!..." said Galina.

Those were her words but she wanted to say:

"Can't you see how wonderful it is? A blue sea, and we are walking, sitting on the porch, at the bottom of it.... The houses are at the bottom of the sea.... And you don't want to think or talk of anything, or if you do think, then you think of something that has nothing to do with houses, or sheds or fences or even this porch."

The woman, however, understood her literally.

"The moon's bright. The cold's come early, it ought to be raining still. There's going to be trouble with the firewood this year."

"Where's your husband?"

"I'm a widow. We lived no worse than anybody else, sowed our field and had a vegetable garden. I shouldn't complain ... if he were alive...." She burst out weeping.

"What can I do, a woman, by myself, and I've had to sell the cow."

"Have you any land?"

"What land have we got? It doesn't run to an eighth of a dessiatine a head. If it weren't for Nikifor Lukich there wouldn't be anybody left in the village: he feeds us. . . ."

"He's a good man."

"Ugh, he's fierce. . . . He's a savage. . . ."

"But everybody likes him, they all go out to meet him."

"What can they do?. . . They not only meet him, they'd lie down and let him ride over them if he wanted to. . . . He holds our village tight in his fist, he's bought up everything all round here, bought up all the landowners, there's no way out of the village. He bought the Selivanov estate, and Prince Bogodugeyev's and Kirpichenko's. Whichever way you look, everything's his; if he wants to he needn't let even a calf out of the village, there's no way out at all, he has a ring round us."

Although the glassy blue was motionless the shadows moved and the fence that had been lit up grew black; a black patch cut across the shed from the corner and the bare branches of the willows were outlined in black against the blue starry sky.

A shaggy dog emerged from the blackness of the shed, came up to them, slightly wagging his head and his bushy tail full of burrs and stood smiling beside the mistress of the house. It growled discreetly, his head turned towards the outskirts of the village, where in the far distance a lonely dog was barking persistently, stopping at intervals to listen to itself. Then he thought better of it, walked away a few steps and flopped down heavily on to the cold ground, where he began hunting fleas in his coat, gracefully lifting a hind leg above his head. At last he curled up into a ball—and everything was stilled.

"Good Lord, how can people live in such silence..." she wondered.

The distant dog stopped barking, the shadow from the house crept across the ball of fur lying on the ground.

"You people live poorly, in ignorance and squalor. The thatch on the roofs is all black and ragged."

"It's the men's fault. They're greedy. Nikifor Lukich gives them land, just think of it, for five or six rubles a dessiatine when it's twenty-eight or thirty from anybody else in the district. That means money in their pockets. They save it up and when they've got enough off they go somewhere else and buy their own bit of land. A lot of them have left here. We wanted to, as well, only my husband died. Nikifor Lukich has sucked all the other villages in this region dry, he's pulled the guts out of the people, flayed 'em like sheep—God forbid we should be as naked and hungry as they are, the children are already dying like flies. Did you see the bodyguard he goes about with, that's because the people want to kill him. For the salvation of his soul he looks after our village—he's from here, you know—and the girls sing hymns for him and pray to God for him. But—pouff! He'll die or they'll kill him.... They intend to kill him...." The woman leaned towards Galina and said these last words in a whisper.

The dog raised its head, looked round and then curled up again.

"... If ever he gets a bee in his bonnet and starts skinning our village too, that'll be the end of us. You can't put a halter on him. So you see they're anxious to save and don't fix up their houses but live like they were camping out."

Galina went home down the bluish, deserted street, stumbling over the lumps of frozen mud. The windows of the school shone with a blue sheen.

When she lit a candle her room looked comfortable for

the first time since she had been there. Curled up in a bed that quickly warmed up she struggled against sleep.

"Everything's upside down," she thought, "I had no idea of it; and there are those kids, dirty, quarrelsome.... And the men?... Their lives are just one big lie. They go out to meet him, bow to him and pray for him, and don't mean a word of it.... They say there is truth in the people.... A fine truth!... I want to sleep.... And there are some nice kids among them.... I'll probably oversleep tomorrow.... I thought I'd do one thing, live in my own way, but everything is turning out differently.... And the people are different from what I thought.... What am I thinking about now?..."

The thought was not finished, a gentle sleep closed her weary eyes with their long lashes.

For some reason the line of demarcation in the village began to melt away. People began coming to her asking her to write things for them, asking for advice in their dealings with the local council and even about their domestic affairs. Some came for medical treatment.

She had never given much thought to sickness, filth and poverty but there was so much sorrow all round her that she had to take an interest in these matters.

It was mostly women who came to see her. In order to get some idea of what she was doing she sent for medical books.

"Why don't you go to the hospital?... You must have a doctor.... What can I do?... The hospital is not far away...."

"My dear, the hospital's only a stone's throw from here, just behind the forest, but that ain't our province, the boundary runs through the forest, and they won't take us. They always say go to your own hospital, we've got enough of our own. Our doctor's strict, but he treats people. There was fever in the village, there must have

been somebody sick in every house, and the doctor came and he lived here for a time, worked himself to death, he did, but he stopped the fever. God give him long life. The only thing is you can't go that far to him, forty versts from here, that's two days on the road, and that's where the hospital is."

Clumsily and with some embarrassment she tried to examine the people so that they would not notice her incompetence, she even tried sounding their chests, tapping them and listening to their lungs, doing her best to distinguish between sick and healthy. She treated the children for diarrhoea, talked with the women about their illnesses but all the time in a strange, casual sort of way so that nothing turned out the way she expected it.

One day there came to her an elderly, flat-chested woman whose pale, yellowish, tired and bony face looked out from a black kerchief. She was followed by a young fellow with a kindly, clean-shaven face, and huge hands like sledge-hammers hanging by his sides. He brought a bad smell into the room with him.

The old woman blinked her red hairless lids, holding back the tears as she spoke.

"I've brought my son to you. Holy Mother of God, no matter how much I talk to him he doesn't listen to me.... I told him to take care of himself but he didn't. If his father was alive he'd have given it to him, he'd have taken the skin off his back and he'd have been as good as gold."

"What's the matter?"

The old woman pressed a screwed-up handkerchief to her breast with one hand and with the other pushed forward the boy who was torn between astonishment and indecision.

"Don't worry, sonny, don't worry, she's just the same as a doctor.... Don't be shy.... Stubborn as an ox.... Yes, you're just like an ox...."

The boy, grinning in his confusion, began fumbling at his trousers with his huge, gnarled, unbending fingers, loosened his belt and began guiltily pulling up a sticky, horribly smelling shirt.

The girl staggered back from him and suddenly screamed in despair.

"Go away.... Go away.... Go away.... What do you mean by.... I order you to get out of here.... Vasily, take them out of here.... Oh, my God, how can they.... How can I get away from here?"

She burst into sobs, ran into the classroom and locked the door. The old woman, however, wiping her tear-filled eyes with her handkerchief and pressing her other hand to her breast bowed low before the door.

"Oh my dear, don't be angry with us poor people. God has punished us.... I told him to look after himself and keep away from the girls, especially from that snub-nosed Fenka. But they won't listen to you. If his father were alive he'd flay him so he'd forget the way to the girls. Fenka is all rotten. And you know yourself it's thirty-five versts to the hospital. We gave him poultices, but what's the use of poultices. Of course he ought to go to the hospital, but how can he stay there, he's the only worker on the farm. How can I keep going without a man in the house? Everything would go to wrack and ruin. Kozlikha sprinkled powder on him but as soon as he got the powder—it was a moonlight night when she did it—he ran off like a madman in nothing but his shirt, ran as far as the mill, and that's a good six versts from here and then ran back to the village like mad; 'it's burning, Mamma,' he cried, 'it's burning so bad I can't stand it.' But it made him better. Sores broke out and the muck came out of him. He ought to put more powder on, but you couldn't get him near that Kozlikha woman if you pulled him there on a rope. You can see for yourself the boy won't be able to walk soon."

Vasily came, took the old woman by the shoulders and pushed her out and shoved the boy in the back with his knee to help him down the steps.

For a long time Galina could not get that repulsive scene out of her mind, she shuddered spasmodically in disgust and ordered Vasily not to let any men in to see her; whenever she met any of the young men in the street she lowered her eyes in hostility—she hated the sight of them.

But still the men came to her; a finger crushed by a cart rail, a boil on a hand hard with calluses, or somebody with a fever that made him tremble like a leaf and gave him a face pale as death.

Time went on slowly, monotonously, filled with the noise of children, with their fights and tears and stupidity, while the grey dull days grew shorter and shorter.

One morning, when she woke up, the room was all white. She looked out of the window—everything there, too, was white, the street, the fences, the roofs and the clouds. And with the whiteness a silence had come, a gentle silence that also seemed fluffy. A horse trotted silently along, its shaggy mane reaching to the ground, the snow was pushed softly aside by the sleigh runners, and a crow, flicking snow off a roof, flew silently over the houses.

The almost universal silence was broken only by the children, running red-cheeked to school with whoops and shouts.

At a great distance, far beyond the church, the sound of bells rose into the air, a sound as faint as the humming of a gnat. The sound grew and grew. At last it came to a stop near the church.

Who could that be?

After lunch Gashka came running to the school, dashed hurriedly up the steps bringing with her fat, rosy cheeks, the fresh smell of snow and cold; her protruding eyes were shining and laughing.

"The mistress is asking you to call—a guest has come."

"What guest?"

"Oh, black..." she roared with laughter, "and squint-eyed...." Again she roared.

Galina looked at her attentively.

"Gashka, how old are you?"

The strong, healthy, rosy face became serious and the bright bulbous eyes ceased laughing and stared at her. As soon as the laughter stopped it was replaced by a look of crass stupidity and something animal-like was expressed in the fleshy chin.

"I didn't speak until I was seven...."

"She's pretty," thought Galina.

"Where are you from, Gasha?"

The girl continued to stare at her and her eyes distended even more.

"Mother used to beat me something awful, and father...."

"Were you born here?"

"No..." she shook her head, "in Puzovka."

Again she brightened up all over, a picture of health, strength and laughter, and again she roared.

"The guest.... Hurry up...."

As she ran through the classroom the floor boards creaked and bent under her weight; the frozen steps creaked as she ran down them and then she was off down the street, at once heavily and softly, throwing up the snow with her felt boots as she ran.

When Galina arrived at the priest's house she was given the usual hearty welcome. As always she brought a magazine with her for the priest's wife. But although the woman asked for them and turned over the pages hungrily whenever the magazine was brought to her, the next time Galina came she would return it unread and ask for a fresh one.

"Let me introduce you," said the priest's wife, looking first at Galina, then at the priest and then at a dark-haired

man of about thirty-two with black, penetrating, slanting eyes, "this is our doctor and this is our Galina." She kissed Galina and looked over her ear at the priest who immediately turned his eyes to the doctor and stared at him insistently and tenderly. "You must be good friends."

The doctor negligently shook Galina's hand, his face towards her but his eyes, shining and black and so penetrating that they were faintly reminiscent of lunacy, looked past her at the window curtains.

"Kurmoyarov, the district doctor," he said brusquely, nodded his head sharply, turned and went over to Lidochka.

"Are you drinking it now? That's it, drink it up. And we'll give you an injection as well. You'll be dancing by the time summer comes."

"God grant," and tears shone in her mother's eyes.

The doctor, however, was already walking up and down the room, the black hair tousled on his square head; he stuck his finger in the canary's cage, drummed with his fingers on the window. He sat down on the sofa, jumped up again, angrily kicked back an upturned corner of the carpet and, standing sideways and looking at the opposite corner of the room, snapped at Galina:

"Studied at the courses?"

Galina shuddered.

"What sort of an examination is this?" she thought.

"Secondary school."

"So."

Again he walked up and down and for no reason at all kicked at the carpet again.

"What a thin beard he has and his skin is as yellow as a Mongol's..." flashed through Galina's mind.

Again he stood sideways to her and looked past her.

"You came because of your convictions? To enlighten the peasants, eh?"

Wrinkles formed as Galina knitted her fine eyebrows.

Examination?!

At the tea-table they did not say a word to each other.

The nocturnal snow showed faintly luminous through the whitish-black windows. The clock ticked.

The doctor sipped tea from his glass and talked.

"The devil alone knows what these people are made of. There is scurvy in Puzovka, can you imagine it?"

"Just like the North Pole," said Father Dmitry.

"I go from house to house with my assistant, distributing citric acid and fruit juice...."

"First of all you have to feed them," said the priest's wife.

Father Dmitry looked angrily at her.

"Fee-ee-eed them!..."

The doctor placed one foot on his knee and tried the sole of his shoe to see whether it was loose. Then he took a deep draw at his cigarette, stooped down and blew the smoke into the open door of the stove whence came a quivering red patch of light that flickered slightly on the floor, radiating warmth and comfort.

"We went into one house, the husband was dying, he had a neglected hernia. He lay there on a bench, his arms hanging down, his feet blue. His wife, her skirt tucked up, was busy at the stove. On the earthen floor a baby lay with his head on the belly of a pig, the pig grunted and they were both delighted. A calf stood by the bench looking at the man lying there, took the shirt from his stomach and started chewing it. The man moved his stiffening fingers with the greatest difficulty and then turned his eyes from the calf to the woman, and said with an effort: 'Why can't you look after... devil....' The woman tore herself away from the stove, hit the calf in the face and said: 'Lie there quiet, seeing as how God's punished you. Look at him lying there, everything's all wrong, and he don't worry....' I felt his pulse, got out my syringe and camphor and gave him a dose. He was in a bad way,

the last minutes. The woman poked her head out of the door and shouted: 'Gashka! Gashka!... Where's that bitch gone....' I could hear children playing in the entry. The woman looked at her husband, wrung her hands and said: 'Dying! Why are you leaving me!' And he looked sideways at her with his dying eyes and said in a scarcely audible voice: 'Die yourself, you....' He didn't finish, his jaw dropped. The woman dropped down with her head on the body and began to howl, then suddenly jumped up and ran to her trough, the dough had risen. 'Oh, Holy Saints...' and began kneading the dough, the bread could not wait. I met her later, her face all thin, her eyes deep sunken, a picture of eternal silent patience, eternal sorrow.... The peasants have their own laws of life...."

He got up, walked up and down the room, kicked the rug again although it was no longer upturned. The priest's wife covered the canary's cage so that the light would not prevent the bird from sleeping.

"Our peasant, our muzhik, lives in impenetrable darkness, but his heart is soft," said Father Dmitry, pulling up his sleeve. "I had a case..."

Galina sat there without raising her eyes and the shadow cast by her eyebrows lay on her face with an air of modesty. She saw before her eyes the dirty, stupid children, the filth and the dog-like fawning Nikifor Lukich—a dark, impenetrable forest. At the same time she experienced a feeling of contradiction, in some way she must break the doctor's haughty self-assurance.

"It's easy to put it down to the people... it's easy to blame them," she said, and blushed at her inability to explain clearly and because what she was saying was contrary to her own thoughts and observations. "The people are in very difficult... their lives are very hard...."

Two deeply penetrating eyes peered at her slantwise, with hatred, it seemed to her.

"The people! What people?"

He ran from one corner to another, with his foot he straightened the corner of the rug that he himself had kicked up, he looked under the cover at the canary and then, fixing his eyes on the girl's face, came closer and closer to her as though he were hypnotizing her.

"Your Nikifor Lukich is also people? He's the cause of scurvy in twenty-three villages, he has eaten up everything himself and left them leather to chew.... People! Every muzhik.... Uh, what's the use of talking...."

As though struggling with himself, he smoothed down his hair but it only stuck up more than ever: he again squatted down by the stove so that one side of his face showed blood-red, and his bristling shadow rapidly fell in a broken line across the sofa and the wall and then stood still.

"The people!... Every muzhik is soft, gentle and kind-hearted as long as he's got a noose round his neck, while he's lying on a bench, dying, while a calf is eating the shirt off his belly; but no sooner does he get out of that situation than he throws a rope round his neighbour's neck. Nikifor Lukich is the vilest and cruelest type of bloodsucker. That's how the muzhik is, either his blood is sucked or he sucks someone else's. You can't imagine the pleasure I get when I cut off the arms and legs or open up the bellies of those creatures—one out of every six of them is ruptured."

"I had a trio of dark bays stolen from me," said the priest and again, by force of habit, adjusted his wide sleeve. "And then, what did I see, he came and sat in my dung-heap...."

"No, you have to look truth in the eyes and not blind yourself or hide your head under a pillow," interjected the doctor, his eyes flashing, paying no attention to the priest.

Galina still felt hostile towards him and did not raise her eyes: It is not a question of the peasant, but of the peasants.

Such, indeed, was her idea. Only she could not express it in words. Nevertheless, with a feeling of contrariness, she tried hurriedly to recall an argument from one of those books she had read where the word "people" is used to cover all rural life.

Then she repeated herself.

"It is easy to blame the muzhik, nothing is easier, but you take a look at the way he lives, the sorrow. . . ."

Feeling that she was again saying something that was not what she wanted to say, she began to take her leave.

"Galina, come around more often, you've almost forgotten us. Here's your magazine. Again I didn't find time to read it, I'll read it some other time. Bring me the new one when you get it," and the priest's wife kissed her, again glancing sideways at her husband.

A heavy frost hung in the darkness of the street and over the dark cottages, the sharp glittering stars floating in its blue emptiness.

Clenching her teeth, the snow crunching as she walked along the beaten path, Galina suppressed a pleasant little shiver such as one gets when one leaves a warm house and goes out into the frost.

On the porch steps she looked round for a moment and she imagined the doctor coming through that frosty darkness, his legs getting tangled in a long, shaggy fur coat.

She locked the door behind her, went into her own room, undressed quickly without lighting the lamp, in pleasant anticipation of a delightfully cool bed that would warm up as soon as she slipped under the blanket.

It seemed that the winter would never come to an end. The same cottages buried in snow looking for all the world like old women in white caps, the same endless snows beyond the village, the same deep-sunken track between the snow-drifts made by sleighs traversing the village street—when the sleighs passed you could only see

heads and shoulders above the snow—and the mound of ice around the well grew higher and higher and when horses came to drink from the trough they fell on to one knee to reach the water—the peasants could not be bothered with chipping away the ice.

Before Christmas Galina and the priest's wife rode to a village some fifteen versts away to a Christmas party at the local school. There she made the acquaintance of her colleagues, men and women teachers.

Once more everything seemed very ordinary to her, not as she had imagined it would be.

Just ordinary people. They laughed, joked, made love to each other. No very noticeable signs of poverty, no oppression, no sign of the silently lofty vocation of carrying the light of knowledge into the gloom of ignorance.

There was not even the romantic haze that so mysteriously and beautifully draws a curtain over human lives: the walls were saturated with tears, and somewhere deep down inside her Galina regretted this.

They talked about meat, it had become difficult to obtain, and milk was dearer, and they spoke of the inspector, the examinations and the school board. They gossiped about absent colleagues. It was all so simple, so usual and on that account just a little bit wrong.

When she was on her way back with the priest's wife, her face hidden in the worn fur of her sleeve to protect it from the biting cold, she felt a sort of satisfaction, however, as though some aspect of life had been added to her experiences.

It was also pleasant to remember that when she and the priest's wife got into their sleigh all the teachers, men and women, had come out to see them off and she and her companion had shouted to them:

"Go back inside, you'll catch cold."

At last an official paid a visit to the school. It happened one day after lunch.

It had been warmer since the morning: the snow sank into a more compact mass, the distant forest and the sky on the horizon became light grey in colour. The school was empty and Galina, after lunch, went to the village shop.

As usual, Ivan Fyodorovich met her with a deep bow, removing his cap, and began to explain the situation.

"It's like this. My wife has been taken sick. You know yourself that she's rather broad in the beam. The best thing to do was to bleed her. They let her blood and with it an evil smell. She simply flopped down like a sack and couldn't get up again. Good."

Suddenly he cocked his head to one side and listened.

"A sleigh with bells.... No, it's not the police inspector, his bell rings loud enough: tilly-tiling, ding, dong.... This one sounds like one little bell. And it's not the police sergeant. And it's not the insurance man, he has only harness bells. Can it be somebody coming to see you? Listen, old One-Eye is chasing the kids out. Must be the inspector. He'll kick up a fuss, he thinks he's awfully important."

Galina went out into the street. Vasily, without his cap, ran along the row of cottages that disappeared into the twilight, banging at the windows with his stick and shouting:

"Send the children to school, the inspector's come."

He ran up to Galina.

"The inspector's come, he wants you."

Beside the school stood a wide, carpet-covered three-horse sleigh, the harness bells still faintly tinkling.

In the half-light of the unlit schoolroom, a short rotund individual, dressed in a long wolfskin coat, a shaggy cap and warm boots kept poking his nose unceremoniously into the teacher's room, every minute turning to look round and shouting.

"Disgraceful! No order! What's the meaning of this?"

Seeing Galina in the dim twilight in her fur coat and hat he turned on her.

"So you keep me waiting!..."

"I wasn't warned...."

"Do you want me to send a deputation to you?... And the school, apparently, has been let run to ruin.... Well, are you going to receive me in your overcoat?..."

Galina, with a lump in her throat, went to take off her outdoor clothes. The children filled the classroom and, looking round in scared fashion, took their places at their desks. Vasily lit the lamp. Galina stood beside the end desk, trying to keep herself in hand.

The little round man still rolled up and down the classroom, his overcoat dragging on the floor, and never once looked at the girl.

"Prayers!"

The children, stamping and shuffling their feet, stood up and turned towards the icon, which could not be seen in its dark corner. The inspector pressed three crossed fingers to his forehead and waited.

"Marfusha, say the prayer..." said Galina, suppressing the lump that was still in her throat.

"Call her by her surname!..." shouted the inspector in a shrill voice, holding his fingers to his forehead and leaning his head slightly forward, waiting.

Galina was for a moment taken aback, but with an effort remembered.

"Balandina, say the prayer...."

The little girl raised her blue eyes to the dark corner, pressed her hand to her forehead like the inspector, and began in a thin voice:

"Most Holy...."

Suddenly she turned her head and looking at the teacher from under her hand said:

"We said prayers already, this morning...."

"Say it, say it...."

The inspector was boiling as he rolled up and down the classroom.

"Have you any idea of school discipline? Or is it merely an empty word to you?..."

"Most Holy Lord, send down the blessing of Thy Holy Spirit...."

The inspector crossed himself furiously, looking at the school children who also crossed themselves expansively.

When they had finished the inspector questioned them.

"The boy at the end, tell me: seven apples and three more, take four of them away and divide the remainder between three boys. How many will each one get?"

The boy stared at him, his mouth and eyes wide-open.

"Well, well, come on.... Show me your hands."

The boy did not understand what he wanted but held out his hands showing nails in the deepest mourning.

"Do you call those hands? They're paws with talons. Now then, you, and you, show me your hands.... They're all the same, animal paws, and not hands. Get your nails cut at once. Out with you to your homes!..."

The children, still not understanding what was going on, hunching their shoulders and looking back at the inspector like rabbits, jostled each other as they tumbled out of the classroom and ran quickly down the street.

The inspector rolled up and down the classroom and then came to a stop right in front of Galina who still stood there motionless.

"Here's what I must tell..." and stopped suddenly.

Until then he had not once looked the teacher in the face, all the time he had merely felt the presence of her motionless unresponsive figure. Now he looked into those maidenly eyes behind thick, lowered eyelids, eyes that were wet and shining, either from excitement or from a feeling of shame and sorrow. And her cheeks were burning with the bright flush of youth.

"Sit down, please.... While the children were here, you couldn't of course, there must be discipline.... Hi, is there anybody there?" The inspector was trying to pull off his heavy coat. "Hi, caretaker!"

"Vasily," Galina called the caretaker. "Help him off with his coat."

Vasily clumsily pulled off the coat and the inspector, trying to do things gracefully, bent his big stomach with difficulty as he stooped to remove his galoshes.

He looked even rounder without his coat; he had a smooth-shaven face with three greying hairs on his chin and all the time he kept rubbing his hands.

"Mine's a rotten job. I'm tired, you understand, tired, I've travelled a long distance and I'm freezing cold. It's a good thing the day is a bit warmer.... I must drive on again, yes, again, or I shan't manage to get all round.... There's neglect everywhere.... You wouldn't believe it, they're not schools, God knows what they are.... Your pupils create a good impression, sensible faces, er... in other words, quite different...."

He rubbed his hands, sat down on a desk and then got up again.

"Good Lord, what can he want?..." she wondered.

"Believe me, I haven't had time to take a sip of tea the whole day.... Hurrying and hurrying...."

"Perhaps you'd like a glass of tea?" asked Galina, uncertain in her perplexity.

"If I won't be inconveniencing you... only if I'm not in the way.... I'm very much afraid to put you to any inconvenience.... May I?"

He went into her room and she called Vasily.

"Vasily, please, light the samovar and after you've brought it in, don't go away, but sit here near the door. Please don't go away...."

The inspector looked at the postcards tacked in cosy disorder on the pinewood wall, at the clean bed, the books

and the magazines. There was an atmosphere of comfort, of pleasing, maidenly cleanliness.

The little green samovar boiled and at times sang in its thin, plaintive voice.

The inspector talked incessantly, gave her all the news from the town, cursed the director and spoke about the theatres.

"Ours is a rotten job, and, to put it plainly, a job that's no use to anybody. I know very well that you all curse us and just can't stand us. I'd be the same in your place.... I was a secondary school teacher once, but couldn't get on with the principal.... All on account of the pupils, they said I was too easy with them.... And so I had to leave.... And here.... I understand, my job's a rotten one. You jump on everybody like a dog, you bark and bite hard, if you don't the authorities will want to know why. There's no other way. And it doesn't do anybody any good."

"Has he gone crazy?" Galina asked herself.

Galina went outside a couple of times to make sure Vasily was still there—he was nodding his head, dozing on a bench. As she returned she peeped through the partly open door and saw the inspector in front of her little mirror plastering a sparse lock of hair from behind his ear right across his bald pate.

Dark night showed through the window and the harness bells tinkled faintly as the tired horses shook themselves.

"I, well, how should I put it.... I've never been married, and without a mistress the house is orphaned, as they say. On the other hand one lives and works, and what then? What is the use of it all?"

Galina looked at him calmly, at his round head with a nose like a button, and suddenly she felt that she was the inspector and he the teacher. She wanted to laugh but made an effort and offered him more tea.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when the inspector began

to take his farewell. Outside the black window the harness bells tinkled and the sleigh bells rang, growing fainter and fainter until they disappeared into the general silence.

Galina stood still for a moment and then took up her mirror and looked into it. A pretty face with downcast eyes and a proud nose looked at her. She smiled and the mirror showed her a pretty smiling face with dimples.

"What a fool he is!"

She hung the mirror back in its place.

She wanted to get to sleep as quickly as possible but she had visions of the inspector still driving on amidst the endless snows—restless and needed by nobody. And then, she had to think of something.

She pulled the blanket up to her chin.

"Fool!"

And somebody asked:

"Is happiness only meant for you?"

"But I'm me and he's. . . ."

She fell into a peaceful sleep.

The next morning Galina could not get the children in order for a long time. They stood in a crowd and, interrupting each other, talked about the inspector, his wolfskin overcoat, his shaggy cap and his huge boots.

"Galina Alexandrovna, give us scissors to cut our claws. . . ."

For half a lesson they cut each other's nails; shouts and laughter; somebody's nails were cut to the quick and the blood flowed. Piles of nail trimmings with their layers of dirt lay on the desks like the husks of sunflower seeds.

"Who can answer yesterday's question?"

"I can, I can. . . ."

They all jumped up.

Galina repeated the problem clearly and precisely and

was astonished at the widely open, attentive eyes of the children.

"They're quite new, those boys and girls..." she told herself. "When did that..."

"Well?"

"Three."

"Two. Two. Two..." they all cried, raising their hands.

"Right, two apples each."

She felt that she had got closer to the children and said: "Now I'll read to you."

The children joyfully crowded round her on the nearest desks, one on top of the other.

This was the first time she had got any pleasure out of reading to the children. She glanced at them casually and saw fifty pairs of children's eyes fixed on her with hungry attention.

"And what idiots they were in front of *him*...."

A few days later the inspector again appeared unexpectedly. He had a very confused look about him. He came during the day. He excused himself by saying that he had to travel back that way. He spent a whole hour at the lesson, questioning the children in a kindly way.

Galina conducted the lesson calmly, hiding a smile.

"You must get what you can out of people like him...."

She asked him confidently about funds for a school library. He fussed a bit and promised to arrange it; he would speak to the director, he said, and to Nikifor Lukich, the School Trustee.

Galina thanked him curtly.

In the village time drags as slowly as it does for a person in solitary confinement, and yet before you can look round there are months and years behind you.

At last winter got over the frosty period and began to weaken. The roofs began to drip on the sunny side; the shadows on the snow became a darker blue, the sun rose behind the row of cottages at a point that moved nearer

and nearer to the church. In the summer it would rise on the other side of the church.

Galina's life went on as usual: the same children, the same women with their tired faces, illnesses and sorrows; the same men who came on all kinds of business; the same snow-bound street and the same well in the middle of a hillock of ice.

And somewhere, far, far away loomed the city, the theatre, *Queen of Spades*, youth—everything without which, it had seemed, life would not be worth living, had faded into the distance and become almost nothing but a memory.

The doctor arrived and Gashka came running to invite Galina to the priest's.

"Again the slant-eyed guest, the black one."

Gashka could not contain herself for laughter but then suddenly became serious, with an animal-like chin and eyes wide-open in wonder.

"I've got a young man."

"Then why don't you marry him?"

"He wants me to have a dowry: a sheepskin coat, two blankets and two pillows. Father and mother won't give them to me."

"Why not?"

"Can't afford it."

"Save your wages for your dowry."

"Father and mother take them."

"Why do you give them up?"

"I have to. They give everything to Nikifor Lukich to pay the rent for the land."

She stood there, first on one leg, then on the other, trying hard to remember something.

"The priest and his wife are always chasing him."

"Chasing whom?"

"My young man."

"How?"

"With a stick. Whenever he comes the mistress screams blue murder and Father Dmitry grabs a stick and goes after him; he jumps over the fence and I hide in the cowshed."

She stared at Galina with her protruding eyes and suddenly burst out laughing again, her eyes flashing, her face flushed.

"We'd better hurry, hadn't we? They're waiting...."

Galina didn't go. "That doctor thinks too much of himself...."

The whole of that evening she could not read, she was annoyed and did not want to do anything. She took down her mirror, glanced into it and an angry face looked out at her.

For a long time she could not sleep. The mute window showed up black and its silence spoke of loneliness, abandonment, of monotonous days lost in the gloom of the future.

She put out the lamp and lay on the bed without undressing, stubbornly closing her eyes that did not want to obey her. When she opened them the black window, with the frost on it melting, looked down at her as gloomily as before.

What was ahead of her?

At best she would marry a school-teacher, that tall one, for instance... the black-haired one... he had come to see her off with the others... at the Christmas party.... And then... five children... screaming... all five screaming... pillows in their mouths... a little pillow....

She sobbed, buried her face in the pillow, which soaked up the salt tears that flowed.

Close their mouths with a pillow... and... the-e-e-n... what? Widow, seven children, and she bony and ugly....

"Oh, my God, oh, my God!" she repeated in despair, striving to hold back her tears.

And that lasted for a long time. Then, from the other side of the wall, came the heavy clatter of wooden wheels and the hum of millstones. Vasily was talking: "The flour-mill has started... it will grind up everything... everything...." And he rolled his eyes and screamed in a terrible voice: "Off with the ceiling, boys!..."

Galina jumped off the bed, bright light streamed through the window, the sun shone brightly from behind the church.

"Good Lord, it's morning already!..."

From the other side of the wall came the noise of children running about. And Vasily knocked at the door: "Time to get up. The children are here."

She splashed ice-cold water on to her face, smoothed her hair and went into the classroom. The whole classroom was filled with sunlight, even the distant corners, and the melting snow gleamed with intolerable brightness through the windows.

The children greeted her, each in his own way, and waved their hands gleefully.

"Take your places, children."

They said prayers: their books and note-books rustled.

Then the same old things over again: add seven and three, subtract two from ten, three times three, what is the sum, the difference—everything so old and familiar to the teacher and so new, unexpected and difficult for the children, who sit with eyes widely opened under the strain.

And a voice asks:

"Is it dull for you?"

"I don't know... I haven't time...."

"Do you remember how anxiously you looked forward to leaving school—the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth forms and then everything would be different, happy, joyful and free, as though you were stepping over the threshold.... You've left school and here you are—with dirty,

snotty-nosed kids, the sour smell of sheepskin coats, wet shoes, cold, coal-gas, overcrowding, women with pains in their stomachs, dull winter days, long, very long nights, with the village lying silent... so quiet that even the dogs don't make a noise.... Do you remember?..."

"I remember."

The lesson drags on, then recess and another lesson. The air is already heavy, burdened with fatigue, faces go wooden, eyes grow dull and the children look like those stupid idiots that had bewildered her on the first day.

Through the window could be heard an old goose with a knobby beak, who stretched its neck and screamed to the sun, to the warmth, to the blue sky, to the sparkling countryside. One of the boys was answering a question at the time but he was interrupted by a thin voice that said:

"That's Dormidontov's gander."

There was immediate animation in the class.

"It's not Dormidontov's, it's Grandma' Kozlikha's."

"No, it's not, it's Tulpan's, from the Old River."

"You don't know what you're talking about...."

"You're off your head...."

"Tulpan's goose is like this...."

The boy pulled in his stomach and with it his cotton shirt so that the ribs stuck out and, making a face, like a goose, proceeded to gobble like one: the geese outside answered him.

The uproar in the class was indescribable: children crawled over the desks on all fours, dropping pens, pencils and books; others grabbed them by the legs and pulled them back; others climbed on to the window-sills and whistled like birds. And they wore a variety of clothes: some had cotton trousers on, some were wearing their father's jackboots, some bast-shoes; the girls were in little, ugly, city-made blouses and had coloured rags braided into their plaits.

There was the same expression on all the faces and at the same time these faces, mostly snub-nosed, were different. Their unwashed thick hair had been cut under a basin; many of them were blue-eyed. Some of them sat there in silence amidst the general hubbub, open-mouthed and staring stupidly at some point in front of them with unseeing eyes.

Galina stood there and smiled: she was amused at the way she had become a widow the day before—and with seven children.

Still smiling she looked at the uproar. It had been going on long enough.

"That's enough, children."

If you let a fire get out of hand you cannot afterwards extinguish it, and once you let children get out of hand it is afterwards difficult to call them to order. When the imp of wilfulness gets into a crowd like that the best thing is to run out of the school.

"Enough, I said!"

Her voice was lost in the noise and shouting. The girl's fine eyebrows twitched and a wrinkle formed between them. She took a ruler from the nearest boy and rapped sharply on the desk.

"Silence!"

That was also lost, only those nearest to her stopped pulling each other's hair and riding on each other's backs.

At last, overcoming the hubbub, Galina asked in a loud voice:

"Have any of you children ever seen wild geese?"

The dying noise crept stealthily out of the room—from the window-sills and from under the desks crept little, perspiring, tousled animals, their eyes shining excitedly. Pushing and shoving they got back to their places, whispered to each other, then there was quiet and they all turned expectantly to that white face with the rosy cheeks and the wrinkle between the brows.

"Who's seen wild geese?"

A girl with a wan face—there was syphilis in her family—raised a pale, dirty hand and kept jumping up and down, jerking her hand and trying to attract attention to herself.

"Tell me, Fenya."

Stuttering and trying to help out with her white half-moulting eyebrows, the girl said:

"Uncle F-f-f-edulla's g-g-g-goose went m-m-mad and b-b-became wild...."

"And they killed it!" said the others in chorus.

"But that's something different."

She had them in hand, however, their eyes were shining again and there was colour in their faces. Then again the old story: add seven to fifteen, take nine away from twenty-eight, what is the sum, what is the difference—until it seemed as though the very walls of the schoolroom were listening in rapt attention.

That day was the first day of spring. Wrinkled icicles hung everywhere from the roofs, glistening in the sun and dripping crystal clear, iridescent drops of water like tears. The track down the middle of the street darkened. The melting snow ridges on the roofs, blue on one side, were sharply outlined against the clear sky.

Once more Gashka arrived, roaring with laughter, and shouted to her:

"The mistress wants you to come, the slant-eyed guest's arrived."

"All right, all right," answered Galina, "I'll be right along."

She had thought that the doctor would never come again.

She changed, took down her mirror and looked at her profile—an aquiline nose.

"I'm quite new.... I'm new every day... different.... It would be good to be able to hold everybody in hand:

the inspector and the children and the peasants and their women.... And the doctor?..."

She put the mirror back in its place.

The house was just the same when she got there: the canary, the bubbling samovar, the pile of well-baked rolls, Father Dmitry, big, handsome and black-bearded, with a cassock that sat on him awkwardly and which he did not need.

The doctor greeted her absent-mindedly, as though they had only parted a few minutes before; he was still unkempt, still concentrating on something far from his immediate environment, still with a stubborn forelock that hung down to his eyebrows.

The sun still shone and its rays, passing between the cottages, fell on windows free from frost. The children were playing noisily in a distant room. The priest's wife brought in an old magazine.

"I didn't have time to read it, Galina: I'll read it another time," and she began hungrily turning over the pages of a new magazine that Galina had brought with her.

Lidochka gave the doctor a pensive, enquiring look with her big round eyes that had something very special in them, something that could not find an answer.

The doctor was talking about things that seemed to have nothing to do with anybody but at the same time it did not seem strange, as though they had all been thinking the same way.

"The most difficult situation for people who are close friends is the coincidence of their thoughts."

He turned his flashing, slightly slanting eyes indifferently on the priest, his wife and Galina. Galina clenched her teeth to suppress the slight shiver that passed over her when those flashing eyes were fixed on her.

"The worst thing... yes.... Your attitude to another person, even to the one who is closest of all to you...

there is something particular about it.... You can examine that which is within you, that is, a process that is your very own, but in another person you need contradiction, you understand, something new and different, something that will break into your own train of thought, bring something new into it, turn everything upside down...."

The priest's wife understood this speech in her own way.

"That's all right when there are no children."

"If you know how a person moves, thinks, laughs, acts ... that's terrible, it's like a mirror of yourself...."

Galina lowered her head and her nostrils distended. As before the fraction of truth in his words aroused an irritated sensation of stubborn contradiction.

"I don't understand you...."

The priest, however, did not let her finish.

"Nikanor Sergeyevich always says things differently...."

His wife interrupted him.

"It's easy for you men to talk. But a woman has the children, and the house, and the servants.... Of course, mental development is necessary. I, for instance, never have time to read a magazine... but this one, Galina, I absolutely will read.... Gashka, there, has just broken two glasses and three saucers. Of course, I'll stop it out of her pay. But Father says I shouldn't."

"It's like stealing from a beggar."

"What do you mean, a beggar! I'm surprised at you, Father. I'm just surprised at you, in the end.... That's... that's something strange, something inexplicable... some sort of peculiar intercession.... She'll break and smash and you'll pat her on the head or perhaps even...."

Father Dmitry waved his hands hopelessly.

The priest's wife, flushed and excited, nervously took Galina's cup and began pouring tea into it.

"Just a minute, I haven't drunk that yet, there's half a cup left."

"The worst thing of all," said the doctor, as though talking only to himself, smiling strangely and morbidly, "the worst thing of all is the coincidence of thoughts, yes, when thoughts coincide like the wooden Easter eggs that fit one inside the other, about ten of them...."

"I don't understand," said Galina, still not raising her long eyelashes, "I don't understand.... If two friends agree it means they have something in common. If it is a case of a man and a woman, say husband and wife, there is nothing for them but happiness, if they are friends, if they have a point of contact."

The doctor's eyes now had a real squint to them as they flashed maliciously.

"That's just it! Something in common.... This is what they have in common: she marries an architect and becomes an architect herself, she's only interested in buildings; if she marries a composer, she wants nothing but music, operas, songs; if it's a police officer—she has detective interests; if he's a priest...."

"Now you've gone too far, sir!" shouted the priest's wife with flaming red ears, pushing the slop-bowl away from her.

"Yes, that's a bit.... That's too much," Father Dmitry's voice drowned everybody else's.

"What's left to us?... Where, then, is the sacrament of marriage?" demanded the priest's wife, flacking a wet teacloth at the doctor.

The latter's eyes squinted still more and had such a glitter to them that the priest's wife wondered: "Has he gone mad?"—and kept her peace.

"And if an architect's widow marries a writer she dives head-first into literature and doesn't want to talk about anything else. The end is the same: they have given each other their souls, their lives, their innermost secrets, and

then, in five, in eight years, everything has been drunk to the dregs and the most horrible time of all sets in—boredom."

The priest's wife slapped at the dishes with her tea-cloth and jumped up, white patches crept over her flushed face.

"Well, isn't that the limit. What is to come next? I, thank God, have lived with Father Dmitry for twelve years in perfect agreement, God grant everybody the same happiness, and now we're going to be bored. I've borne him children and we've told each other everything there is to tell, now I can go. And what do you want Father Dmitry to do? Someone younger, eh?... Look how handsome he is! Who do you have in mind for him, I ask you? There are plenty of young ones about. He can take Gashka, she's a healthy girl.... And apart from that....'"

"That's enough, enough I tell you. Have you gone crazy, Mother?" And Father Dmitry rose angrily from his seat.

"Of course it's enough.... I know those theories, they're just to your taste. You've taken away my youth, health and strength so now I can go on to the shelf...."

"You really are bored, you haven't made a scene for such a long time. A scene's just bread and butter to you. All these scenes of yours are piled up here." Father Dmitry slapped the back of his neck. "You're eating away my life...."

His wife's eyes filled with tears and she sobbed:

"Of course, it's my fault.... I've spoilt your life.... And when you were courting you talked about suicide.... The ch-ch-children are the only con-so-la-tion...."

Lidochka, who was watching her mother with those same huge, enquiring eyes, lifted her thin arms, put them round her mother's neck and asked in a pretty, but not childish, enquiring tone:

"Mamma?..."

Her big, wide-open eyes showed perplexity and the usual sadness when no response came to her grown-up, expectant tones.

Her mother hugged her passionately and wiped away her tears.

"Phew, how foolish of me!... Lidochka, tell them to bring us something to eat."

Night looked in at the window; the samovar grew cold.

The doctor was deep in his own thoughts, staring past everybody.

"If I were to meet... yes..." For a moment he covered his face with his hand. "It is given to a man to love, to experience the keenest, all-embracing feelings, and that, that is happiness. How can you not retain it, not carry it with you all through life. There is some colossal deception, some vile deception."

He covered his face, sat still for a while, then uncovered it again, and the eyes that looked at Galina were perfectly straight, black eyes without any glitter but filled with the most profound sorrow.

"A woman has no life of her own, do you understand me, nothing creative. I don't mean in the sense that she might sit down at her desk, take up a sheet of English paper, a mother-of-pearl pen, raise her blue eyes to the blue sky...."

"But mine are grey," thought Galina.

"...and write verses. I don't mean that sort of creative effort but something simpler, ordinary, everyday. When she rocks her baby, for example, she might sing a song of her own, she might tell her own, original tales, clumsy, perhaps, that could not be written down, but her own. Do you understand what I want to say, something of her very own. If you look into her eyes sometimes you will find them strange, she is thinking of something of her own and doesn't want your thoughts to interfere and that

makes a new woman of her, she is quite new, different from what she was before. And you tremble and you long to know what there is behind those eyes. . . ."

"Horns for her husband," grinned Father Dmitry.

The doctor did not hear him, he was walking up and down, his hands behind his back, his head bowed.

"The man has his own work, his own sphere of activity, where he can go, where he can get away from everything, even from the family. The woman has nothing of this, everything is on view, everything is exhausted in one go, and that's the end. That is a tragedy for them both, misfortune. . . ."

Galina was bursting with a desire to make a thousand venomous objections but the fear of making empty caustic remarks that did not affect the discussion held her back.

The priest's wife, who had by now got over her excitement, said quite calmly:

"Men like you should never marry."

Gashka came in carrying plates on a huge lacquered tray with arabesque designs. Her red cheeks looked flushed and puffed and there was laughter in her frightened, staring eyes. The priest's wife passed round the plates in her efficient way.

"Please, help yourselves. Here are pickled mushrooms . . . different kinds. . . . Nikanor Sergeyevich, Galina. . . ."

The doctor helped himself, thinking his own thoughts, and again he squinted.

"What are you doing, Nikanor Sergeyevich, meat and fish on the same plate; here you are." She pushed another plate towards him.

"You were saying," began the doctor, not looking at Galina but addressing himself to her.

She was annoyed with him: why did they all dance to his tune and only say that which pleased him.

"The inspector has been twice to see me," she said coldly, not looking at him. "He's amusing. Sent for the children and...."

"You said that all the muzhiks..." said the doctor, looking squint-eyed at her.

"This is getting disgustingly indelicate," she thought.

She began piling soaked whortleberries on her plate, demonstratively paying no attention to him.

"Mother, give me a spoon, please."

"You say that all muzhiks are Nikifor Lukich in embryo...."

"Why, you said that yourself!" Galina raised her eyes in astonishment, turning crimson out of hostility to him.

"I did?... What's the difference.... You, too. You can't go against the obvious...."

He stopped suddenly, morose and weary.

Gashka's broad, red face peered round the door.

"The horses are waiting. There's water under the snow and the coachman's cursing...."

The priest's wife waved her hand impatiently and Gashka disappeared.

"A woman is like the night ... dreamy darkness. And the muzhik ... the muzhik is like a forest, dense, black, dormant. You go through such a forest and sink into a swamp or break your leg on a snag, you poke your eyes out on the branches, but you go on and on, you have a vision of some clearing in the distance, but there's no end to the forest. Well, it's time for me to be off. Are you going, too?"

"Yes, I'm off."

"Let's go together, I'll accompany you."

"No, I'll stay just a little longer."

He stood there sadly and then said good-bye. A few minutes later the faint tinkling of harness bells died away, leaving behind a strange impression which might have been either anticipation or sorrow.

Father Dmitry strode up and down in company with a shadow that grovelled at his feet. His wife washed the tea things, making a clatter as she did so.

"An unusual man, a strange man. . . ."

"A lunatic," his wife put in, calmly.

"You don't meet that sort every day. He works like a maniac. He's twice been down with typhus. The peasants are afraid of him. My first acquaintance with him was strange enough. I went to Podgornoye, where the hospital is, forty versts from here, there was a fair on at the time. I was with the church elder, he wanted to buy a bullock. I sent the elder to the hospital dispensary to ask for tooth powder, you know, it costs practically nothing. The elder went there and asked the doctor's assistant for a little tooth powder for the priest. The assistant began pouring some out. The doctor came in. 'What's this?' He turned to the elder. 'Who's that for?' 'The priest asked for it.' The elder got scared. 'To clean the censer,' he said. 'You tell the priest that when his censer grows flesh and teeth grow in that flesh, I'll give him tooth powder, but till then, don't show your face here again.' "

"Ignoramus," his wife interrupted him again.

"After that we made it up and now we're good friends."

Galina went home in the dark, keeping close beside the fence, the frozen crust of snow crunching under her feet. It smelled of snow that had melted during the day, of puddles covered with a thin film of ice, of manure that had grown hard in the evening frost—it smelled of spring.

The days grew longer and the sky bluer and the sun came into its own. There was no way of avoiding or forgetting the sun from the moment you opened your eyes, everywhere there were patches of gold, and God alone knew what was happening in the street: sparkling brilliance and the noise of running water; it was hard to get the children into school, they jumped over the streams,

launched ships made of chips of wood and when they did get to school they were jubilant and wet up to the ears.

Although the roads were not fit for either walking or riding Galina had not the patience to wait; on Sunday instead of going into the church whence came the sound of discordant singing—she was supposed to go to church on every Sunday and Saint's Day and would be reported if she did not—she went past and up the rise.

As far as the eye could see lay the dying snow. It hurt her eyes to look at it; the whole open expanse above the melting snow was filled with flashing sparks; on the high ground black patches of bare earth were steaming in the sunlight. The villages, near and far, were like dark islands, the snow had fallen from the roofs and the road, brownish in colour from the thawing horse-dung, wound its way through them.

"No, no, don't go down there!" she warned herself.

But she was already on her way down, she reached the bottom, falling again and again through the melting snow; her galoshes were full of water and her feet were wet, but she was filled with unrestrained joy and happiness.

She turned back—the village was far behind on a rise. The domes of the church showed green and the thatched roofs of the cottages that had become still blacker and more rotten during the winter could be seen; from the village there floated the sounds of gossiping hens and crowing cocks, dogs barking and the voices of children calling each other, and all of it had a new note in it, a spring note that was permeated simultaneously with the warmth of the spring sun and the cold of the melting snow. She wanted least of all to return to her lonely, empty room. How much irregular movement there was in that quivering brilliance, in those dissonant spring voices, and a voice asked:

"Don't you want to live, to love?..."

When she at last returned, tired, happy and joyful, her arms and legs ached pleasantly and her head was slightly dizzy. She wanted to go and see the priest's wife, but she didn't, her tired head longed for the pillow. She got into bed, surrendering herself to a sort of swiftly sinking sleep and immediately the church bells began to ring the alarm.

She opened her eyes—it was quiet and dark. No sooner did she close them, however, than again she was surrounded by a lurid roar that made her head ache terrifically.

"Stop.... I don't want..." she said plaintively making an effort to raise her leaden eyelids. The roar increased in volume, filling the room, the village, the fields of melting snow.

"Oh, give me a rest!..."

"Nothing of the sort..." came the voice again. "Let the muzhiks get on with their business and you with yours. Women and muzhiks are all the same—darkness...."

With a superhuman effort she raised her painfully heavy eyelids and immediately there was a black and empty silence. Only the rectangle of the window was faintly visible on account of its dull, leaden light.

It hurt her, however, and her eyelids, heavy as lead, slowly, slowly covered her burning, aching eyes, and the blood-red roar was there again, vacillating, growing to unbearable dimensions.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter."

She ceased struggling and gave herself up to the inevitable.

The room filled with people. Fedosyushka was there too. She bent over Galina and began tearing off her skin with tongs.

"Fedosyushka ... do you remember ... how we walked along the bed of the sea? And the shed, and the cottage,

and you and I—on the bottom, and above us it was all blue and cold. . . ."

"Don't torture me!. . ."

And rolls of fat formed on Nikifor Lukich's neck.

A thin, pale girl knelt down and dropped her head on to the bed and asked, without moving her lips:

"Do you love him?"

Galina did not answer.

"Why do you love him?"

Again no answer.

"Because he's different?"

"No."

"Because he works forty-eight hours a day?"

"No."

"Because the peasants are afraid of him?"

"No."

"Because he has a beard, a moustache, black eyes that squint?"

"No."

Silence.

She looked up in astonishment: Nikifor Lukich and the rolls of fat were gone, the thin, fragile girl had melted into tears. The women were grieving. She heard the voice of Vasily:

"They've come."

"Thank God and the Holy Virgin," said Fedosyushka. "You poor, sick thing. . . ."

The unknown face of an old woman took shape in the air, at first vague and indefinite and then clearer and clearer, a face with wrinkles, a sunken mouth and red eyelids. The aged face bent forward and looked at her with milk-coloured eyes.

Galina was terribly afraid, a fit of shivering seized her whole body and again came that deafening roar, growing until it gave her pains in the head.

The old woman looked at her with milky eyes and fidgeted with her fingers.

Mumbled words, some comprehensible, others not, merged into a whisper that drowned all other sounds:

"...in the sea, in the ocean, stands an old oak stump...."

The ringing of bronze bells continued—ding-ding-dong....

The monotonous mumbling whisper of the old woman struck right at the pains.

"...and on the stump stands a church.... Beside that church stands a priest, holding a cross. And it is as if in the sea, in the ocean there is no oak stump. On the oak stump there is no church, there is no priest and he is not holding a cross...."

That rustling, mumbling whispering went on and on, calling forth sleep, and the thunderous roar gradually subsided.

"...so that the servant of the Lord...."

She had no sooner whispered these words than the girl's sleep was disturbed by the discordant, whining chorus of women's voices that reverberated unbearably in her head:

"Galina...."

Again the monotonous whispering that drowned the growing roar:

"...so that the servant of the Lord, Galina, should not be wracked with sickness, I invoke, I exorcise the pains from her writhing stomach, from her white vitals, from her red bowels so that the servant of the Lord...."

And again the chorus of women's voices, reverberating in the sick girl's head, chanted the word:

"Galina...."

"...so that the servant of the Lord, Galina, shall not lay down her bones, that her body shall not dry up and shall not burst open, and shall not belch forth...."

Then there were no exhausting shivers, no old hag and no women. The postcards showed up faintly on the wall. Somewhere, far, far away, there flickered a scarcely perceptible trace of the dying roar.

Was it day or night?

It was most likely evening and probably for that reason familiar features were pressed against the windowpane: a familiar knitted shawl and in that shawl a head that nodded, in a friendly cordial manner....

"No, it is painful trying to recognize, trying to recall."

She closed her eyes and the distant roar, at times rising slightly and then falling again, finally died away to be replaced by painful thoughts that racked her head. Perhaps that was everything that was going on around her, that other life that was going on, that had been and was being accomplished all the time beyond the outward signs of everyday life that were ordinarily visible, behind actions and words, behind the peasants, behind the children, behind the priest's family....

She opened her eyelids slightly—the same postcards, the black window, the light on the table shaded by a book and, gradually hiding all of it, a head appeared—the head of the doctor. His black eyes looked straight at her without blinking....

"Mamma!..."

That cry was the cry of a sick heart, a sick, lonely heart, but her dry lips only moved soundlessly, there was no Mamma, there had been no Mamma for a long time and she knew it.

The doctor looked at her for a long time, maliciously, or sadly, or without noticing her, thinking his own thoughts—she could not tell which.

Galina closed her eyes helplessly and obediently gave herself up to dark, silent repose. When she opened them slightly again, the head was not that of the doctor but of

Fedosyushka, and the same light, shaded by a book, stood on the table.

Fedosyushka nodded, nodded, nodded and then swayed suddenly forward, and her shadow on the wall followed her; she jerked up her head and sat still and then again she nodded, nodded, nodded....

Galina looked at her and... laughed. There was light coming through the window and the shaded lamp on the table looked red—morning, was it?

She wanted to call Fedosyushka, but she had not the strength and, smiling weakly, dropped off again into a regular, calm sleep.

She awoke with a feeling that somebody was shamelessly tickling her eyelids. Her eyelashes trembled; she opened her eyes and the prickly, golden rays of the sun joyfully and impudently prevented her from seeing anything.

"Fedosyushka, is that you?"

The whole room was bathed in bright sunlight.

Fedosyushka ran to her and straightened her blanket.

"Oh, my darling, my poor little sick one! God and the Holy Virgin be praised.... Here, drink this, the doctor ordered it.... Vasily came to me and said the teacher had collapsed, then he went to the priest's wife. She came running here and saw you looking as red as a beetroot and dashed out like lightning. 'I've got children,' she said, 'and that may be catching.' She straight away sent their labourer with a pair of horses for the doctor. No one knew when he'd fetch him, maybe he wouldn't be there and you might die waiting. So the muzhiks sent Mikitka, that's the one that brought you from the station, to Goryainovo to fetch Yeremeikha, and he was there and back in no time. God grant her long years, she said a spell over you, otherwise you'd never have seen daylight again. The women crowded into the room, they were sorry for you. The priest's wife kept coming to the window, pressed her face to it in tears—she was afraid to come in.

The doctor came like a madman, drove them all away, Yeremeikha and all the women, he left me alone here with you, and how he chased me, curse him, made me wash my hands twenty times over, tortured me, the devil.... He himself sat by you a whole night through, I think. He brought medicines, oi, those bottles!... And the priest's wife sent you beef tea from fresh meat, and so strong, all red!... But you wouldn't take as much as a dewdrop. Oi, what an old fool I am, talking away at you, if the doctor came in he'd tear me to pieces."

Galina smiled benignly and had only one feeling—she loved them all—Fedosyushka, the muzhiks, the women and the priest's wife....

"And the doctor?..."

But more than anything she loved that bright joyous light, the light that tinted the whole room with that warm, blinding gold.

By the time she was well enough to go out the snow had gone beyond recall. Whichever way she looked there was abundant green vegetation to the very horizon, to the blue sky itself. In the green haze of the orchards lay the villages of Nikifor Lukich and it could not be that there was sorrow, poverty and hunger there.

It had been raining for two weeks. Everything was again drowned in that impassable sea of mud, but now it was not hopeless—the birches that bowed their heads and rustled in the wind were no longer bare but were bright with young green leaves.

"It's all right, let the earth take a good drink, glory be to God," said the peasants, removing their caps and crossing themselves.

During lessons, after lunch or when she was reading a book, Galina would frequently look up at the windows down which streams of water were hurrying. All the time she was waiting for something, she did not know what,

either for the sun to shine in the blue sky, lighting up the green of the fields and opening up the distant view, or maybe expecting somebody to come at any moment.

But who? There was nobody who might come.

At last the wind had done its work, had dried out the clouds and chased them farther on; they ceased sprinkling heavy raindrops and hurriedly fled, opening up ever greater expanses of blue until at last the dry, clean sky was blue everywhere one looked.

And then, as suddenly as if it had burst out of nowhere, resounded the deafening chatter of a multitude of birds. They darted about everywhere, flashed for a second amongst the bushes, whistled hastily as though they were afraid to lose time.

The freshly-washed green dazzled the eyes and the whole countryside offered up paeans of praise to the already warm sun.

From the window she could see how quickly a crust had dried on the mud of the street, and the white geese appeared at the well to stand there like sentries.

After lunch a carriage and pair appeared at the end of the street. A coachman in a long coat was flourishing his whip but it was impossible to distinguish the passenger sitting behind him.

Dogs ran out of the yards, barking furiously. The carriage wheels slowly churned up the heavy mud.

Would he go on through the village? Or would he turn off somewhere?

Perhaps it was the district agronomist, or the insurance agent, or the veterinary surgeon or perhaps merely the sewing machine salesman who sold his machines on easy terms. Even if it were some unknown person let him stop in the village, let him walk along the paths already beaten hard by the cottages and fences, he would bring something new to the village, liven it up. Never before had she so wanted to see a new face as now.

Nearer and nearer. Now she could see that the passenger was a lady in a black straw hat and veil; she lifted a hand in a black glove to straighten it.

The carriage, still churning up huge chunks of mud, turned across the street towards the school.

"Oh . . . coming here! . . ." Galina said joyfully to herself with a very slight sigh.

Horses with bound-up tails halted at the school porch.

Galina went out to meet the visitor. The lady touched her fingers lightly to her temples and said:

"My maiden name is Angarova. . . . Terrible mud. . . . Have you got a mother? I believe your mother is dead? . . . Is this the school?"

The mobile face could not be seen through the heavy veil but the momentary flash of restless eyes made itself felt.

"Come into my room," said the astonished teacher.

"No, no, no. . . ." The woman defended herself desperately with her hands. With a great tenseness, convulsively twisting her mouth, she peered into Galina's eyes. The girl felt it difficult to breathe and shrugged her shoulders.

"Come into the school," the visitor then suggested.

They entered the classroom. The lady inspected the pictures of animals, birds and fishes hanging on the walls, glanced at the hemispheres and tried to turn the blackboard round.

"Do the children obey you?"

Galina shrugged her shoulders.

"As much as they do anybody."

"Oh no, they obey you, they obey you without an effort. . . . You don't allow anything . . . no punishments, and they're like wax in your hands. . . ."

"How do you know?"

"I know, I know! . . ." she said, and the tears could be heard in her voice. "Come on . . . let's go into your room . . . quickly, please. . . . Let's go to your room. . . ."

They entered the room. Angarova sat down at the table, turned half round, lifted her veil and began to peel off her gloves.

"Tell me, tell me straight out... those postcards... so nice.... They're nice because they're all crooked and in disorder...." She was still peeling off her gloves without turning round. "Can you tell me honestly?" She turned round suddenly and looked at Galina. "Do you love my husband?"

Galina took a step backwards away from her guest and stared at her with wide-open eyes, at the pretty, dark-skinned face of a southerner, at the delicate, well-chiselled nose and at marvellous hazel eyes full of loving kindness under elegantly curved black brows.

"I see you for the first time in my life."

The other woman, checking the trembling of her lips, answered:

"I am Kurmoyarova.... The doctor comes to see you.... I am his wife ... the district doctor...."

There was such pain, such utter despair in those most attractive hazel eyes that Galina bit her lip.

"But listen to me... where did you get such an idea?... I very rarely see the doctor... only by accident... a few words in passing...."

The other woman, spasmodically gasping and trying to control her trembling lips in order not to sob, burst out:

"That's true.... I believe you.... You are sincere... but he, he loves you...."

Galina flushed a deep red.

"I have given him no reason.... I don't understand...."

"No, no, I don't suspect you.... He hasn't said anything.... Perhaps he doesn't realize it himself.... He is honest and straightforward. Whatever he says is true. Our relations are wonderful.... He tells me everything, every-

thing, his every step, everybody he meets.... You have a brother and for his sake you have taken work in this hole, give lessons during the holidays... you are very capable with children and they obey you without any punishment...."

"Why, I've never said a word about that to him."

The guest looked at Galina with despair in her eyes.

"That... that's just the proof.... He doesn't suspect it himself.... He's too honest.... He knows everything about you, everything... unconsciously he has learned everything.... He says that you are beautiful...."

She looked keenly at the girl and her eyes filled with tears.

"It's true... he's right.... But I... am I to blame? What have I done wrong?... He loved me, loved me very much!... And the child... we have a boy... he means everything to us.... But I can see what is happening to him. He's just the same, sincere, honest... he doesn't hide anything, and I see, I feel that something is happening to him. Even the slightest change in his heart does not escape me.... I hear everything, I feel everything.... Oh, my God!... Only when you are in love, when you are deeply in love, you feel everything in him.... I and ... he ... we...."

Her whole body trembled with silent sobs and she pressed her trembling lips tightly together.

Galina, never once taking her wide, staring eyes off the other woman, made a tremendous effort to control herself; that day, the sun... she had got up in the morning, tea, the children, noise, shouts, lessons, lunch, all the usual routine and it seemed that that which was happening at the moment would drift away and the interrupted order of things would return to its normal course.

No, it would not drift away. At the table sat a young woman, her veil raised, a woman with beautiful, trusting hazel eyes, from which her black eyelashes wiped away

tears, a woman with a pretty, pale and exceptionally attractive face.

Kurmoyarova seemed to have grown calmer.

"Don't think badly of me, I'm not mad and I'm not foolish ... But still ... my God ... I don't know myself.... You understand the awful feeling: you love someone, love him madly ... everything, your whole life has been sacrificed, nothing else is left ... and you are loved, loved profoundly, with a pure love and you know that, and suddenly you begin to feel ..." her voice dropped to a whisper, "something is undermining that love, it is weakening ... it is falling to pieces, brick by brick, piece by piece, grain by grain, and you can do nothing, nothing at all, you see it with your eyes and cannot raise a finger ... and the horror comes nearer and nearer, it is harder to bear ... soon it will crush everything...."

She stared with big round eyes full of horror and whispered like a conspirator.

"Listen to me, I keep watch over his very breath, I do even the smallest thing for him. He has not time himself, he's always on the move, he cannot read the magazines, I read three or four of them and tell him everything that's in them. I have learned so much about illnesses, medical terminology, special research, I read the medical journals and mark the most interesting articles for him.... I have given him my whole self.... Am I to blame? ... I am not the tiniest bit to blame.... He loves me.... And the baby is not to blame." Suddenly she smiled, "and you're not to blame ... you are sincere ... he said so ... I know...."

The girl looked at her with the same round, agonized eyes, feeling that this was a border-line over which no one could step.

Then she lowered her eyes and sighed in relief.

"That has happened to *her*, it happens in general to others, but *that* will never happen to me..." she thought.

"Calm down, please," she said. "Take a drink of water,

here is a glass. You are simply exaggerating. Nikanor Sergeyevich and I meet rarely and for brief moments and quite by accident, when he comes here to visit his patients. I will now take steps to see that we never meet again, that's all."

The other woman, her lips trembling, with a frightened look held out her hands as though protecting herself.

"No, no, no.... Not that.... Anything but that.... I shall not take any steps.... Either he will be mine alone... all of him, or we part...."

Her eyes were now dry, her face had become hard and cold.

"Never."

The carriage, slowly and heavily, still churning up clots of mud with its wheels, drove off and gradually disappeared into the bluish distant end of the street.

Galina stood with her hands pressed to her temples.

"It's rather unpleasant.... Why did she do that?... Am I to blame?..."

Grey eyes with long lashes and an aquiline nose looked at her out of the mirror....

"Yes, you are to blame."

"But I gave him no excuse, either by word or sign."

"Guilty."

She stood for a while, her eyes downcast.

"I know what to do."

It had always seemed to her that to make any change in the accustomed way of life would be very difficult, like all sudden breaks. But once she had handed in her notice to leave the school, however, everything became quite easy and simple—she just had to pack her things and get into the cart.

Galina sat in front of the open basket on the floor of her empty room, packing clothing, books and postcards into it; the bare walls looked empty and forlorn.

The feverish time of the examinations, when both she and her pupils had been strained to the last ounce of strength, was already behind her. The chairman of the local board had come for the examinations—a well-groomed young man, one of the local aristocracy, wearing the badge of a university. He spoke through his clenched teeth and sat all the time cleaning his nails, his eyes half closed.

Yes, everything was as easy as moving from one apartment to another. She recalled her hopeless thoughts that night when she had imagined herself a widow . . . seven children . . . and smiled.

The woman who had tried to bribe her with a ruble, and the old woman who had brought her son suffering from a horrible disease—they hovered somewhere in the distance, vague and without any malice.

Vasily had come into the room several times, had stood there, shuffling his feet, sighed and gone out again.

A swallow flew into the room, hastily circled round it twice and then clung to the ceiling in one corner, folding its sharp wings, breathing frantically and turning its head from side to side. Then it gave a sharp cry and darted through the window, swift as an arrow. Through the window were glimpses of the bright green of early summer. Cocks crowed lustily while the hens chattered away. Far away outside the village an empty cart clattered along.

And here she was, packing all alone, just as she had lived all alone. For a moment something clutched at her heart.

Again the swallow flew into the room, clung to the wall for a moment and flew off again. And again that same bright day, the chattering of the hens, the distant blue forest; the sparrows were chirruping excitedly, and again for some reason everything was easy and joyful.

Fedosyushka came to help, sticking things in one or another corner of the basket where they did not belong.

"No, Fedosyushka, don't do that, they don't belong there."

And Fedosyushka asked for little things, for an empty tooth-powder box, an empty medicine bottle, an old handkerchief or a piece of rag.

Although these were all things of no importance it was unpleasant to feel that her eyes were everywhere looking for something else she could ask for.

Other women also crowded into the room. Although they did not ask for anything, they followed her with their eyes, waiting for her to make them a present.

Two days later she left. Vasily had ordered the cart.

The sun had only just risen over the row of cottages when the voices of children resounded under her window—the children are like sparrows, they gather quickly on every possible occasion.

Vasily began carrying out her things. Fedosyushka came, there was nothing else to ask for—but never mind, she had brought some patties for the road.

Outside in the street, by the school porch, there was a noise, voices shouting.

"What are you holding on to my cart for?"

"Leave it alone. Who asked you?"

"Let go!..."

"I'll push your giglamps through the back of your head."

"The last one I hit died next day."

Vasily's voice broke in:

"What are you poking your nose in for, Ipat? Nobody sent for you, go back where you came from."

Galina looked out of the window: Vasily, the carter he had ordered to take her to the station and Ipat were all trying to take possession of her basket, trying to tear the ropes that held it out of each other's hands. The basket

creaked and jumped on the ground under their efforts to drag it in various directions. A crowd of men and women were standing around them and others kept coming up.

In astonishment Galina went out on to the porch: instead of one cart, two stood there.

"What's the matter?"

A tall young man, the one who had insulted her one evening—she hadn't complained, what was the use?—jerked the basket out of the hands of Vasily and the carter and, holding them off with his whip like dogs, dragged it to his own cart.

"What's the meaning of this? What are you doing?"

The man stopped, holding the basket up by one corner, and looked at her with malicious eyes.

"Order them to stop barking, Galina Alexandrovna," he said. "They're barking like dogs and don't let me do my business."

"Then why did you touch the basket?... Give it to Vasily."

"He wasn't hired," shouted people in the crowd.

"He's doing what he wasn't asked to."

"Ipatka, you're mad, that fellow was hired and you're shouting your head off...."

Ipatka turned angrily round, his malicious eyes gleaming blackly; he still did not let the rope of the basket out of his tight fist.

"What are you barking somebody else's tune for? How much did you get?" he asked turning to the carter, a man with a fine beard.

"Get?" repeated the other, ridiculing him. "I asked five rubles for forty versts. Robbing her, am I? When I get back I'll have to wait for a day till the horse is rested."

"And I don't ask a kopek!" The young man struck himself on the chest with his whip handle. "Can I take anything from her?"

"No, that wouldn't be right."

"She's worked well for us."

"We never heard a bad word from her."

"Let him do something for her."

This seemed to have settled the quarrel. The young man threw her basket viciously on to his cart and started tying it in place, his elbows sticking out.

Galina stood there in perplexity. She had not the heart to say that she was afraid to travel with him, all his movements were so full of confidence.

"Hi, you, One-Eyed slacker, hand me up the rest of the things to go at the back."

The young man got a seat ready for her, busily stuffing hay under the rope so that it would not rub.

"Listen, I don't want anybody to take me for nothing. We hired the other man, what did you come for?"

"What's the use of fighting with him," said Vasily, "he's just ignorant. I suppose you'll have to go with him. You, Yevseich, had better unharness your horse. Ipatka's gelding will be better, he'll get there quicker, he wants to do her a good turn for nothing."

"Ipatka's got the better horse, he'll get there all right," came the support of the crowd.

"All right, let Ipatka take her."

Galina still stood there perplexed while her things were roped on to Ipatka's cart. Again she felt that bitter pain, she was alone in this crowd. Something prevented her from protesting.

"Here, Yevseich, take this, that's for your trouble."

Yevseich stuck the half-ruble in his mouth, held it in his cheek, climbed into his cart and drove off with a rattle down the street.

Everything was packed on the cart, it was time to leave. Again it seemed a pity. She wanted to take a last look at the classroom, and at that little, empty room that had silently received and retained the girl's thoughts,

dreams, hopes, sorrows and loneliness, just as it had the tears of that poor girl who had cried there and about whom nobody would have known anything if it had not been for Vasily.

"Good-bye, Vasily. God grant you everything that is good. And take this. Thank you, thank you very, very much for everything," and she took his rough, gnarled hand and pressed it cordially.

Vasily sniffed and looked past her with his one eye.

"You shouldn't go. You could live here all right. There's no need to wander about the world. And people get married here no worse than anywhere else."

"Good-bye, Vasily."

She went out into the street, it was time to take her place. The crowd of men and women, usually so indifferent to everything, was still standing there. The young girls were eating sunflower seeds, the women held their babies; the children, her former pupils, were running about, chasing each other, shouting to one another.

She took a look at the cart to see if everything had been loaded and saw that there was no place for her to sit, all the empty space had been filled up with bags, packages and pieces of rag with something wrapped up in them.

"What's all this? These aren't my things. What are they doing here?"

A pale-faced woman came up to her, placed a sinewy hand on the rail of the cart and said:

"Those are patties and things we made you for the road; eat and enjoy them, and God grant you all the best."

"And that's from me," said another woman with a baby hanging over her arm. "You taught my Vanya to read and write, God grant you good health."

"Never mind, eat it up," said another woman with a baby in her arms, the one who had cursed the teacher

when she had not found room for her son. "It's a long way and you'll want a bite to eat. Everybody that had anything to bring has brought it. If you'd have stayed you'd have taught my Vanya to read and write."

Galina looked in astonishment at the men and women and at her former pupils crowding round the cart.

A little girl with the pale face—the one with syphilis in her family—looked at Galina shyly when the teacher's eyes rested on her for a moment, and stuttered:

"Uncle F-f-f-edula has a wild g-g-goose...."

Her thin lips trembled and tears glistened in her eyes:

"I'm sorry you're going....

"Are these the same people," Galina asked herself. "Where did they come from? Who are they? I've never seen them before...."

The thin, strained barrier between them seemed to have broken down, they all crowded round her and spoke at once, the women wiping their eyes with the corners of the kerchiefs.

"God grant you whatever you wish...."

Somewhere inside her, vaguely and for a brief instant, flashed the thought:

"They were like that to Nikifor Lukich..." but immediately died away again.

"Pleasant journey...."

"All the best...."

She was seized by a joyful fright, she felt again that this was something absolutely unknown, and seized the little girl and kissed her on the lips.

The women came up in turn, wiped the corners of their lips with their thumb and forefinger and kissed her. The girls also kissed her while the boys, by way of farewell, pushed out their cupped hands towards her.

She could scarcely distinguish one hazy, diffuse face from another when at last she climbed into her place, and one woman after another placed something on her lap—cakes, pies and carrot patties.

"With our best wishes, dear."

Galina, ashamed of herself, and trying to control her trembling lips, thanked them.

"Thank you, thank you, my dear friends.... Phew, what's wrong with me...."

"And you, Ipat, look after her and deliver her safely.... That's a good gelding, he'll get there all right," said the men crowding round the front of the cart, where Ipat was taking his place.

"You'll stop for water at the Wet Corner."

"Mind you don't sink in the swamp over the ridge, keep to the right."

"I know," said Ipat with contemptuous confidence, gathering the ends of the rope reins under himself.

"Good-bye...."

"Stop! Stop! Stop!"

The women held on to the cart, looking round. Trotting hastily along came a little girl and behind her an old woman. The old woman approached the cart, placed a thin, wiry old hand on the cart-rail and looked at Galina with old, hazy, milk-coloured eyes.

The little girl, scarcely able to catch her breath, said:

"I've brought her."

Those milk-coloured eyes were firmly fixed in Galina's memory but she could not, for the life of her, remember where she had seen them. The old woman, still staring at her with her knowing, calm eyes, said:

"Aren't you feeling well, girlie?"

Where had she heard that voice?

The women all spoke at once.

"Say a spell against the authorities, Grandma, against the authorities. The authorities are chasing her away....

A spell that will make it easier for her to deal with them. . . ."

Then she remembered: night, the burning, fantastic ringing, the postcards appearing and disappearing in the darkness, the light shaded by a book and the monotonous whispering of the old woman.

"I'm quite well, Grandma."

"That doesn't matter, that doesn't matter," cried the women. "A spell, Grandma, say a spell against the authorities, the authorities are chasing her. . . . Never mind, Grandma, a spell will be of use to her. . . ."

In order to get away quicker Galina was willing to listen to the spell but she was ashamed to do so in front of her pupils. The women, however, were all holding on to the cart-rail and the men were sniggering.

"The women'll raise. . . ."

"Of course, the authorities won't keep her. When they get anybody decent they always drive him away. . . ."

"I'm going at my own request. . . . I gave notice. . . ."

"We know, when they tell you to give notice you have to. . . ."

"Never you mind, let her say her spell, it won't hurt. . . ."

"You won't moult. . . ."

Galina could already hear the old woman's dry whisper, the milk-coloured eyes were looking at her, and a thin, wrinkled old hand was making sweeping signs of the cross.

". . . for the first time in God's hour. . . . I invoke. . . and I exorcise . . . between the meadows, between the roads, stands a bath-house without corners. . . ."

What could she do, it would be a pity to push aside that old woman's hand and order Ipat to drive off.

". . . so that he might sorrow and grieve and have pity, and protect in times of feasting and in talk and in her soft bed. . . ."

The old woman took her hand off the cart and, still staring with her old, milk-coloured eyes, made the sign of the cross.

"Amen. God grant you, dear. . . ."

Ipat whipped up his gelding in a determined manner. The wheels rattled. Galina looked towards the school for the last time—Vasily was standing on the porch. Afterwards he would relate how she had left in the same way as he had told her of the girl who had died in tears and about those who had grovelled at the feet of the authorities and stuffed a pillow into their baby's mouth.

That old building, and the garden and the birches all seemed so near and dear to her.

The crowd was still standing by the school. The children, shouting and whistling, ran after the cart. The familiar cottages receded on either side.

"Won't you come back here to those who need you?"

And a voice said:

"No . . . she wants to live!"

Somebody shouted to them from behind. They stopped. Hurrying along, her face flushed, came the priest's wife. Galina got down. The crowd joined them.

"And I thought," said the priest's wife, panting slightly, "that I'd missed you. I heard that you'd been to see us yesterday and we weren't at home—Father Dmitry and I went to the garden, he's still there, he sends you his regards."

"She was almost late," came a friendly voice from the crowd.

"God bless you, and his most holy Mother."

She made the sign of the cross several times over the now silent girl and then hugged her closely.

"You . . . you are like my mother," said Galina embracing her and restraining tears that again sprang to her eyes, "yes, and what's that for?"

"That's all right, you'll need it, the journey takes all day," she sat the girl down in her place and gave her a paper bag.

They set off again. As they turned from the village into the fields she could faintly discern the school at the end of the street, the women with children in their arms who had still not dispersed, and the priest's wife who continued to wave a scarcely discernible white handkerchief.

Then they drove down into a hollow, where swamp water gleamed amongst the sedge grass and were pulling up the opposite slope on to the dirt road when Father Dmitry appeared in an open buggy. He halted at the cross-roads and descended. Ipat also stopped, bowed unwillingly and removed his cap.

"Now that's lucky," the priest declared. "I'm on my way home for something I've forgotten."

He looked at the clear sky and spoke in a voice that was very unlike the baritone Galina was accustomed to, a much weaker voice.

"You are going away?! Hm-hm, we'll be left here alone, left here...."

He was no longer a singer, no longer even a handsome Seminary student, he was just a village priest, he even seemed to be shorter of stature.

"Yes, we'll be left all alone."

He squeezed her tiny hand tightly between his two big ones.

"Well, God grant you... well... happiness, of course... grant you...." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Galina blushed. Ipat flicked the dust from his boots with his whip.

Father Dmitry got into his buggy, looked round at her and then drove off towards the village.

Ipat also drove on but kept looking back all the time; then he stood up on the box to his full height to look back. He laughed and sat down.

"The priest turned back to the garden on the other side of the rise. He was only pretending when he said he was on his way to the village, he was shy of you, now he's on his way to the garden. Gee-up, you beast!. . ."

"He's scared of his wife, scared to death of her," he added gleefully, turning round towards Galina.

The awkward, long-legged gelding was running sideways in the shafts, looking back at Ipat from under the hoop. Ipat tried all sorts of tricks, tried to cut him with the whip without his noticing it, but no matter how cleverly he worked with his whip on one side or another the horse would stare back at him from behind the hoop with his big, black, stubborn eyes, clap his tail down hard and almost stop, anticipating a blow, then, with a flick of his tail would trot off again sideways, no matter how much Ipat pulled the rein the other way, and would look back all the time at his master, driving the latter into a fury. From time to time Ipat would lash the animal violently and he would stand still and look back at his master waiting for the fury to pass.

Galina pulled out a handkerchief and wiped her lips with it, rubbing them as hard as she could—she remembered that she had kissed Fenya and the girl had a wan face and there was syphilis in her family. She had also kissed the women—again she began rubbing her lips and cheeks.

The faint humming of mosquitoes could be heard, either in the blue woods or somewhere behind, it lasted for some time and then died away.

From time to time the wheels rattled and jumped over roots running across the road.

On all sides there were bright green patches of young

bushes where the trees had been felled and in the distance loomed the mighty untouched wall of the forest.

"Fenya's mother also gave me cakes for the road, where are they, you can't tell one from the other here.... She was all scarred, and had festering eyelids...."

Bluebells on either side of the road nodded their heads, ringing their bells with a faintly elusive tinkle.

"And the others as well ... how can you tell who's sick and who's not? Sometimes they don't know themselves...."

On a young tree that had somehow survived a chaffinch gave forth a cheerful song.

The girl took the first bundle from the top and carefully, so that Ipat would not notice, shook the cakes and patties out on to the road. One after the other she got rid of all the packets, keeping only that which the priest's wife had brought.

Again a faint tinkling sound came drifting through the air, stopped for a short while and then died away, and it was now clear that it was not the ringing of the bluebells.

"It seems as though I am trying to wipe out their memory, and they only wanted to be kind. That's bad. Nothing's like I thought it would be.... Here I am riding with Ipat and I'm not afraid.... Poor Father.... And his wife, poor thing, she's a fine woman but you can tell she's a priest's wife.... What a pity to go away and leave them all.... Nobody knows them, and I don't know them. Oh, if I were a writer ... but then it's something you can't write, you can't tell the story, you have to be here yourself.... What a lot of bells!... Somebody is coming!..."

Now it was quite obviously a brass bell hung from a carthoop ringing. Sometimes it was quite close at hand, then it would die down somewhere in the blue distance, lost in the morning freshness.

"He's driving a pair," said Ipat without turning round.

The sounds became fainter but more joyful when they entered the forest. The sun stood high over the forest spattering the branches and the grass with golden patches.

"Now, now, my skylark.... My little golden darling.... Ei, ei, birdie...."

Ipat had given up flogging his horse and was now trying gentle persuasion, occasionally flicking his whip.

Even this, however, did not win over the long-legged gelding. Still trotting along sideways, almost directly across the shafts, he stared stubbornly back at Ipat with his big black eyes.

"Eh-eh ... my sugarplum...."

Galina rocked rhythmically on her seat of hay. Blue shadows and patches of golden sunlight floated gently across her face. An unconquerable desire to sleep closed her eyes.

The forest gradually filled with the soft tinkle of bells and the scent of violets. Red-trunked pines hemmed in the road.

The birds screamed with almost human voices, all the time one and the same: here-here-here ... she's here.... And there was another which was rapidly repeated: stitch-stitch-stitch ... stitch-stitch.... Others played whimsical tunes on a flute but all the time the tune was the same; they had apparently forgotten the end of it and kept starting over and over again.

Galina realized that her head was nodding and dropping on to her breast.

"That's bad, it's disgusting..." but she could not drive away insistent sleep.

"Ha-ha-ha-a-a, she's here, she's here!" screamed a horrible voice, and the howl that had been growing all the time in the forest broke off suddenly over her head.

Her heart beating wildly from a fear that could not be suppressed, Galina leapt up.

Ipat stood grinning beside the cart. The gelding was no longer looking back but stood there quietly, his skin twitching and his ears laid back.

"Oh, God, I'm alone with him here."

"What do . . . you . . . want, Ipat?" she stuttered.

Behind and over her head bells clamoured deafeningly.

She looked back: looking at her over the cart-rail she saw the tossing head of a shaft horse in its hoop and beside it a trace horse rubbing its muzzle against its outstretched foreleg, both of them with their sides heaving and their red nostrils distending and contracting.

The doctor, square-headed, high-cheekboned, thickset, was coming towards her cart.

"Good morning, I was afraid I wouldn't overtake you. . . ."

Galina hurriedly straightened her skirt and her hair and passed her hand over her face to drive away sleepiness.

"The young lady got rocked to sleep," said Ipat, still grinning.

"Get down and let's walk a bit," said the doctor, "the horse can't go at a trot here, anyway," and he made as if to help her get down.

Galina jumped down from the cart as quickly as she could, giving him no opportunity to assist her.

The coachman had been fumbling about inside the doctor's carriage and now came towards them with his arms filled with pies and patties.

"You must have been shaken up pretty badly, these were all lying in the road."

"Why, they're ours, they're ours!" cried Ipat in chagrin. "The whole village baked things for the young lady. They must have fallen through the hole in the

cart. Only the bag the priest's wife brought is left here.... Give them to me."

Galina turned as red as a peony.

"How did that happen.... No, Ipat, I don't want them now, they're all smothered in dust.... No, don't...."

"That's nothing, we can blow the dust off them."

He began energetically blowing on every one of the cakes and patties and piling them on the cart; the dust flew from them in clouds together with Ipat's saliva.

"I don't want them, I tell you," said the girl.

"You just shake those that are wrapped up," said the doctor. "The others are too dirty."

"No, don't bother about any of them."

"Then give them to me, I found them. The doctor was cursing me all the time because I kept stopping to pick them."

"Huh, give them to him.... Your mouth waters as soon as you see something sweet. We brought 'em and you're going to eat 'em, eh?!"

"Stop arguing and divide them between you. Come on, Galina Alexandrovna."

They walked along the edge of the road between the trees. Behind them Ipat's cart creaked lazily along over the roots that ran across the road, behind it the doctor's carriage and pair dawdled just as lazily but with a rattle of harness bells.

Ipat and the coachman walked behind, raising a little cloud of fragrant forest dust, eating cakes and talking.

Rainbow-hued dewdrops glistened on the leaves of the bushes. A wagtail flew ahead of them, its tail twitching.

"I didn't know you were going away. I haven't seen you for three weeks," said the doctor; he removed his dusty cap and that made him seem quite different—his white, clean, innocent forehead with the black forelock hanging over it lent a softness to his somewhat Mongo-

lian face. "When I was told, I dropped everything, visiting patients, the hospital and everything, hired horses and raced after you."

He had no sooner said this than Galina felt that he had said everything there was to say.

"Perhaps, when I was sleeping ... my mouth was open...."

As she thought of this possibility she also pictured in her mind an open carriage disappearing into the distance, and in it the figure of a woman with a veiled face, and the wheels of the carriage slowly and hopelessly churning up clods of heavy, black mud.

"If only that which is going to happen now were not to happen..." she thought in torment.

She walked with her head bent, her lips tightly compressed, watching her black shoes appear in turn from under her dress and press down the long blades of forest grass.

The wagtail still flew ahead, twitching its tail and luring them on—there must have been some forest stream nearby.

"What a morning," said the doctor, waving his cap, "and the bees!..."

The bees swarmed and hummed, turning to gold as they darted through the patches of sunlight.

"Wonderful! Do you know that since I've lived here in the village I've seen it all for the first time in my life. There are all these things in the cities, I know, and then I've lived in country cottages and have visited landlords' estates in summer...."

"What for?"

"To give lessons.... All this was there, too, and I saw it, the village and the fields and the forest.... But now it seems as though it were for the first time in my life...."

"That's true. And it's not only true of nature but of the muzhik as well. Take your humble servant, for exam-

ple, until I came here as a doctor everything was upside down in my mind—the village and the muzhik."

"Our ideas coincide," she thought sorrowfully.

She sighed softly but at the same time felt better, as though she had been released from her waiting.

"I came here as though I were going to prison, to exile and now it's painful and difficult to go away again—there is something that attracts me to the village and the peasant men and women."

"Well I can tell you this. In the old days the *Narodniki** went to the muzhik in the village, they went with ideals, you know, they were holy people, like the early Christians—they could have got decent jobs in the city but they went willingly to semi-starvation, semi-poverty —ascetics, in a word—and were drowned in the black earth like the rare seeds they were.

"You and I, however, we have come here to earn money, for our bare wages, but the difference is that we are not alone, we come in numbers, a solid body, and we turn up the black soil. We do our work more or less honestly and if we are not fools we pull the muzhik out of the earth as we would a ploughshare. Taken as individuals we are, perhaps, as worthless as a single soldier, but as a mass we can break down all resistance, if we only keep step."

The forest stood calm, green and indifferent, a perfect background to her loneliness. From behind them came the tinkle of harness bells and the slow conversation of the coachmen.

"You once said that there is no such thing as the 'muzhik,' there are only 'muzhiks' in the plural."

* *Narodniki*—the revolutionary-minded intelligentsia of the sixties and seventies of the last century who "went amongst the people" in an attempt to arouse the peasantry to revolutionary action against tsarism.—*Ed.*

"Yes, yes, as long as he has a noose round his neck he is a 'muzhik' but once he gets out of the rut he becomes Nikifor Lukich. It's the same with all of them. Nikifor Lukich is in every one of them in embryo. But that is of absolutely no consequence, they can't all get out of the mire, only a few odd individuals escape. On account of this there is some sort of similarity amongst all peasants."

"They cast a spell over me against the authorities," she said, laughing, and recalled how somebody had asked her those questions during the night.

"Can it be that I love him?"

They walked on, now and again accidentally bumping against each other, feeling a certain closeness and at the same time a distance between them as though they had only just met. During their walk they talked about the village, about music—the doctor played the violin well—and about literature, as though there were no forest, as though the bees were not humming, as though the lazy talk of the coachmen and the occasional tinkle of harness bells did not exist, as though they were promenading in a theatre foyer amidst a lively, well-dressed throng.

The red pines, the oaks and hazels receded from the road as it dropped down into a wooded hollow, whose dark tree-tops lay gloomily below them; on the far side of the hollow the road made a sharp turn so that it seemed to end against a solid wall of forest. The doctor and Galina stood still on the ridge above the hollow as though they had reached some boundary line.

"So this is the end.... And then? and then I shall continue my way on the cart with Ipat, then the station, the railway, then the town, then... then?..." pondered Galina.

The doctor was going to say something but thought better of it and both of them listened to the forest silence

which contained the tapping of a woodpecker, the crunch of wheels, the regular knock of axles in the wheel hubs and the resinous aromas of the growing day. Down below water gleamed amongst the bushes and the sedge.

"Galina Alexandrovna... here we... well, that is... here we must part... I must... just one word... I must say...."

He was angry with himself and frowned.

"I love you."

Although it was obviously just what he should have said she was surprised at the suddenness and novelty of the idea and her heart painfully missed a beat. She did not raise her eyes and made an effort to handle the intricacy of the sudden rush of mixed feelings of fright and surprise, and also of joy, hidden deep down inside her, which she herself would not have admitted.

She lowered her eyebrows in a frown of severity and the wrinkles formed between them.

"I don't understand.... How can you..." she began.

Behind them the cart had come to a halt and the tinkling of the harness bells and clatter of the wheel hubs were silenced. Galina and the doctor started down the slope into the cool of the hollow, towards the log bridge; water gleamed on both sides.

He did not look at her but said calmly and dully:

"I have no family, no child."

He stopped in an effort to control himself. There was a smell of decaying leaves and a bittern boomed—oo-oo-ooff... oo-oo-ooff.

"My wife came back after her visit to you—I did not know she had gone—and said to me: 'Nikanor, you don't love me any more, I know it, I've known it for a long time.' And I said to her: 'What are you talking about? Have I ever given you cause, by one single word or one

single movement: you are as dear to me as ever, we have a child.' But she was insistent: 'No, no, no.... I don't want your outward show, I want you to love as you did at first and you can't; I don't need you like that.' She was pale and I said to her: 'Stop, Musya,' but she went away, her face was hard and cold, she looked at me as though I were a stranger and said: 'I need justice, I need equilibrium, I have given you everything, everything—my girlhood, youth, all of myself, my whole life, my every thought, nothing is left to me, everything has been drained to the bottom. Now you will live again, you will be happy but for me there is no return, it is all over: I shall fade and grow old. So there you are,' she said, 'I'm going away with my son and you'll never see him again, only don't think,' she said, 'that this is revenge, or malice or a wish to give you pain. No, this is only balancing life, otherwise, you must understand, it would be monstrous....' And then she went away."

The doctor stopped talking, continued walking up the slope looking down at his feet and above them stood the forest, barring the way.

"I know that she has an iron will and I shall never see my son. If she had a different character, of course, we should have lived on together the same as thousands of others in our position live; I would never have done anything to ruin her happiness. Now I shall never see my son again. Perhaps this is really equal distribution of suffering. What ought I to do? Search for her, struggle, take the child away? No, that I shan't do, I have ruined her happiness, her life. I am not to blame, you think? That's true, but neither is she to blame. Who is to blame?"

"Uncle F-f-edul-l-la... has a wild g-g-goose...."

Galina walked with her head bent, still watching her black shoes as they appeared in turn from under her

dress. And the forest that surrounded her, filled with the honeyed aroma of crushed grass, and the tapping of the wood-pecker, and the warbling melody of the oriole, the flute of the forest, everything around her, everything receded into the distance cut off by the impassable barrier of her own indifferently calm life.

"... w-w-wild ... g-g-g-oose...."

"You said the same to *her* ... that you loved her," she wanted to say to him, "you were just as much tormented and then you found happiness, then came the son, then ... then your ideas began to coincide.... But our thoughts coincide, too...."

But instead she said:

"One cannot step over life, over other people's happiness."

He frowned.

"Why can't you see that that is all past. It is as though somebody were dead, and everybody were afraid to step over his life."

She stopped and, without raising her eyes, said:

"Good-bye!"

She walked on and he remained standing still. The harness bells were still silent and she could hear the creaking of only one cart.

The forest stood like an impenetrable wall in front of her, the road rose out of the hollow and turned sharply to the left to skirt the wall. The hazel bushes had begun to hide the hollow and the log bridge, and the forest on the other side had become alien and empty.

She looked back: the doctor still stood in the road without his cap; behind him his pair of horses were leaning into their collars to hold back the carriage; the long-legged gelding, side-stepping, was pulling the cart round some obstruction; Ipat walked beside his cart, flicking his whip and finishing off the patties. She looked at it all for the last time.

Words filled the forest, words teeming with tears and sorrow or maybe with happiness:

"That happened to *her*, to *that one*... in general it happens to others, but with me things are different, quite different...."

Scarcely moving her dry lips she said:

"Nikanor Sergeyevich, please see me as far as ... the station, I'm alone here in the forest...."

1917

On the Ice

I

RAGGED GREY clouds, like a scattered flock of startled birds, swept low over the sea. The keen, blustering sea-wind gathered them into a solid dark mass only to tear them playfully apart again, arranging and rearranging them in the most fantastic patterns as it drove them back and forth.

The gale gained in fury, churning the water into white spume. The leaden seas rose in a heavy swell, broke into patches of foam and with a dull moan rolled on and on into the distant darkness. The wind, screaming angrily over the tousled crests of the waves, scattered the salt spray far and wide. A white, serrated barrier towered high above the shallow waters of the winding coastline, a mountain range of colossal ice-blocks hurled down by Titans in some furious mêlée.

In a series of steep terraces the sombre, primordial forest ran down from the neighbouring heights to the water's edge. The wind howled amongst the red trunks of age-old pines, rocked the sharp-pointed heads of the stately firs shaking the snow from sorrowfully drooping branches. There was a gloomy sense of latent menace in that dull, level union of sounds, and over all hung a lifelessness impregnated with the sadness of death. In that silent land the hoary ages had left no trace in their passing and the primeval forest remained, its dark-hued tree-tops swaying in calm solemnity as though wrapped in profound thought. Not one single tree had yet fallen victim to the axe of the rapacious timber-merchant; bogs and marshlands filled the hollows of the thickets. And there, where the century-old pines had given way to scanty bush, the tundra spread endlessly, a dead barren expanse lost in the infinite, cold darkness of the low-hanging mist.

For hundreds of miles there was not a wisp of smoke or a habitation to be seen, not a single trace of man. There was only the wind whirling the powdered snow into eddying vortices while the dead darkness spread low over a white desert.

Once a year restless man found his way even here to disturb the dreary lifelessness of that wild coast. When the fierce frosts provided a passable road through swamp and tundra, when the irregular outlines of the arctic ice-pack could be seen relentlessly advancing out of the distant gloom of the sea, from the banks of the River Mezen and from the coastal settlements, a strange procession made its way through the tundra and through the spurs of the ancient forest: iron sleigh runners screeched as they slid over the deeply frozen snow, small, wide-antlered reindeer, harnessed to long black boats placed on runners, moved along in single file, treading cautiously on the hard frozen snow-crust, and beside them, with

heavy waddling gait, strode the dishevelled white figures of men.

And the ancient trees glowered in anger at the uninvited guests who pitched their camp for many miles along the forest edge.

II

The man called Magpie stood on a block of ice, harpoon in hand, and gazed intently into the cold distance. Almost on the horizon white hillocks appeared, scarcely discernible at first, then taking on the irregular outlines of the ice-pack. Magpie stood immobile in an attitude of tense anticipation. There was every portent of good hunting: a bird had screamed, flying low shorewards in the wake of the wind, and the wind itself had veered to the north-west.

Down to the very earth spread the mist and it clung to the tops of the pine trees; the forest was alive with sound. Yes, the hunting should be good. And he peered into the cold distance in search of game; but the mist rolled over the surface of the water, the eye could discern nothing.

The day was coming to an end. The wind howled amongst the pine trees, whipping the powdered snow into whirling columns. From all sides the grey, lifeless twilight of winter crawled on, covering the deserted shore. Here and there from behind massive blocks of ice appeared shaggy white figures carrying harpoons and gazing intently into the misty distance. The sea rumbled dully. Far from the shore the ice-pack came on, an ugly white heap.

Magpie glanced along the shore—behind a nearby mound of ice he saw the man called Raven, harpoon in hand, also gazing out to sea. Magpie looked at him and his heart grew heavy. A sound man, Raven, in his strong

deerskin parka, and his new hip-length boots; there he stood, leaning on his harpoon and gazing out to sea—clearly he was not anxious—there would be good hunting. Raven would launch his new schooner and trading would be better than ever; and if the hunting were not good, still he would have no cause to worry.

And anyway, Raven would not overstrain himself in the hunt; he had hired men to do the work. Magpie himself was hired out to Raven and because Raven had provided him with warm clothing he would have to surrender half the proceeds of the hunt to him.

The wind rose noisily, ripped open the mist and carried the quivering blanket of lifeless gloom away to the very horizon. Magpie looked that way and roused himself. Raven, his new parka, Magpie's discontent, and the fact that he had to give up half the spoil to Raven were forgotten —Magpie forgot everything and fixed his keen eyes on the brightening distant scene.

As far as the eye could see a furrowed, contorted field of ice moved towards the coast, a field that spread into the cold, grey haze of the distant horizon. Huge, bluish blocks, rearing above the white mass of pack-ice, rose slowly into the air and then collapsed with a thunderous crash as the incoming tide exerted pressure on them from below. Heavily moved the ice-field and over it there was a gamut of sound not at all like the roar of surf, but more akin to the dull thunder of a hurricane faintly echoed from God alone knew where.

Magpie picked out a few hovering birds, tiny black dots almost imperceptible to the naked eye. His eyes gleamed. Game! He gathered the leather rope into a coil, tested the harpoon, took up his curved club and made ready, waiting for the ice-pack to reach the shore.

He looked round and suddenly realized that the day was almost over, for it does not stay long on those distant shores. The sun sends its cold rays over the hori-

zon for something like an hour and a half and then hurriedly sinks very near to the place where it first showed itself.

The last dying ray slipped through the rent in the mist turning the snowflakes into myriads of rainbow-hued sparks, was reflected in the ice and for a moment cast a faint light over the dully rumbling ocean, over the uninviting, snow-enshrouded shore and on the hundreds of human figures dotted along it.

Here and there on the sparkling snowdrifts of the coastal hills dark patches stood out, the sooty, smoke-ridden huts used by the seal hunters.

Again the wind howled, the mist closed down, drawing a veil over the dying sun, giving the whole locality a miserable, lifeless aspect.

III

The first waters of the incoming tide reached the shore and swirled around the foot of the ice-blocks. Waves that had hitherto raced noisily on their way grew silent as they were weighed down by the heavy ice-pack. The ice-field drew close to the shore with a roar that reverberated through the depths of the forest. There arose a mighty hissing and rumbling, a crash of breaking ice-blocks, as though a hundred-footed monster were at large. Meeting the shore ice, the forward edge of the pack pressed onward by the heavy mass behind it, crawled up the barrier, showering white dust as it went, and piled up on top in a chain of fantastic hills. Sounds mingled in one chaotic roar. The fine ice dust hung in clouds and was spread by the wind. The movement of the ice-field, checked by the barrier, was transformed into destructive energy of colossal power: in a few minutes the broken contours of new ice mountains towered high along the whole coastline.

No sooner had the ice touched the shore than hundreds of seal hunters rushed forward.

Magpie was one of the first to leap on to the ice. Leaping from floe to floe, slipping and sliding, sinking up to the waist in snow and ice-mush swept into drifts by the wind, he raced forward. Huge blocks of ice crashed down behind him. His whole being was gripped by a single thought, insistent, taut as a thrumming violin string, a thought that was repeated in his breast with every beat of his palpitating heart: "Get there in time.... Oh, Lord on high.... Oh, Holy Virgin...." Ice chips flew from under his heavy boots like spray. The wind whistled in his ears and cut his face with icy needles, coating his beard and moustache with hoarfrost. But he noticed nothing, he only ran on and on.

Night fell and the coast-line changed into a faint contour in the dim distance. Magpie halted for a moment and, holding his breath, listened intently. There was nothing around him but the howling of the wind. The endless ice-field merged with the thickening twilight. "Oh, Lord, I'll not get there.... I'll miss them!" he thought in despair, "I must get back, the tide will turn!"

The very thought that he would go back with empty hands caused a shudder to run through him. The smoke-filled hut, the family, the children waiting.... He dropped down and pressed his ear to the ice: from somewhere away to the right came a sound astonishingly like the sobbing of a child. In an instant all weariness was forgotten, he dashed away in that direction and suddenly fell flat on the ice face downwards: in front of him yawned a dark crevasse. He had to run round it. At last Magpie, the perspiration pouring off him, made out in the rapidly deepening darkness the faint outlines of several dark objects.

With a single bound Magpie was there. A whole family of seals lay sprawled in awkward poses on the ice. They

came to life as they scented the presence of man, lifted themselves on to their fore-flippers and raised their ugly heads, dragging their heavy bodies along clumsily. They felt ill at ease in the presence of an enemy on the ice, far from their native element.

Overtaking the nearest animal Magpie struck him a blow between the eyes with his club. The seal dropped its head to the ice, the harpoon whistled through the air and the iron point sank up to the crook into the bridge of its nose. Drops of hot blood sprinkled its face and the heavy animal, that could not be killed by a bullet in any other part of the body, stretched out on the ice. With well-aimed blows Magpie killed several more of the seals.

A practised hand that shook slightly from excitement and fatigue removed the skins and the layer of blubber from the dead animals. Magpie worked as fast as he could, all the while reckoning how much he would get for the skins. He was happy and light of heart and smiled to himself as he worked. If he was as lucky as this every time he would soon put the family on its feet.

But time waits for no man; before he knew where he was the tide would turn. Hurriedly he gathered the skins and blubber together, rolled them into a bundle, tied them with the leather strap, passed the strap over his shoulder and set out dragging his bundle along the ice. It was no easy task to drag two hundredweight or more over the uneven, broken surface.

The dark obscurity of night fell over a sea noisy with moving ice. The cold impenetrable darkness crept towards him from all sides, spreading an ever-thicker blanket over the ice-field across which swept a cold wind that howled amongst the piled-up ice.

Magpie felt his way, guided by the wind and by certain signs known only to the people of the arctic coast and invisible to the uninitiated. He strained his eyes to peer into

the surrounding darkness, occasionally testing the ice in front of him with his harpoon. The sweat poured down his face but he felt no fatigue: he was not empty-handed, and the main thing was to get back.

Magpie knew well enough that when he got home his entire haul would go to pay his debts, everything would go to pay Raven, the kulak, to pay for his hunting equipment; nevertheless he gladly dragged the heavy bundle and the sweat rolled down his face.

"The shore's still not in sight," flashed through his mind.

He glanced around: impenetrable night stared back at him grimly with its dead eyes. A sudden presentiment swept over him.

"I mustn't be late, I've been away too long. Time's up!"

He threw the strap over the other shoulder and hurried on faster even than before. The persistent thought that he would be late, that the ebb tide would carry him out to sea, bored deeply into his brain. Magpie tugged desperately at the tightly strained strap and felt that he was too late. His knees bent under him, he began to stumble. Ahead of him in different places two or three lights flickered through the curtain of darkness: the shore must be near.

Magpie mustered his last ounce of strength to run on. He was gasping for breath, his temples were throbbing and his throat was dry and pained him as he sucked in great gasps of cold air.

He wanted to pause for an instant but made an effort to control himself, and, grabbing a couple of handfuls of cold snow as he ran, increased his speed....

Something began to rustle and rumble. Ahead stood the faintly outlined mass of the barrier, the ice shuddered and creaked.

"If I drop the bundle, I can still make it!" flashed on his mind for an instant.

But he did not drop it, he made a terrific effort and ran on, dragging the bundle....

IV

The seal-hunter's hut made a black patch in the snow that hid it up to the eaves. Ruffs of smoke came out of a hole in the roof and were quickly dispersed by the wind.

Inside the hut the gloom was relieved only by a small fire laid out on a pile of stones in one corner; its ruddy, flickering light cast a dim reflection on the black, windowless walls, the smoke-blackened roof with its garlands of soot, and the filthy shelf along the wall on which the hunters slept. Layers of acrid smoke filled the air. The bulky figures of seal-hunters lay on the shelf, some twenty or more of them huddled together. This was a detachment of that army of seal-hunters, many hundreds strong, that are driven every year to the deserted shores of the White Sea by need and the hard life of the North.

Time passed slowly and with painful tedium. The sea, their own element, had played an evil trick on them—for a few hours it had been white with the ice that brought abundant game to the coast, then suddenly the gale had come and the ice-field was shattered and broken, piled up in shapeless heaps for hundreds of miles. There was nothing to occupy the men during the long arctic nights and short grey arctic days, for the only forms of diversion known to them, tobacco and song, were taboo.

"The sea loves cleanliness and prayer," say the hunters, "if you smoke and sing and curse the sea will give you nothing: the shore wind will come and tear the skin off you and what's more it will drive you out to sea."

Clouds of resinous smoke rose from the dull red fire in the corner around which were more hunters, some sit-

ting, some lying on the ground, listening to tales and all kinds of reminiscences to break the monotony of their idleness.

Outside the hut the snow crunched under somebody's heavy tread.... The door burst open, the cold wind played amongst the red flames of the fire and gathered the smoke into cloudlets. A man in a parka entered the hut. A face, so covered with hoarfrost that it seemed to be overgrown with white moss, glowered morosely from under a hood.

"Magpie didn't come back," he said in a low voice, "he was carried away!"

Everybody stopped talking at once. The same picture flashed up in every man's mind: the cold open spaces, the ice and the starry sky and on the ice a man who would fight for life until he froze.

"What are you sitting still for?" demanded an old man in a grim voice. "Get the boat out!"

Eight of the men began pulling on their parkas.

The old man went outside and looked at the sea. A mirror-like surface stretched away into the frosty distance and from the high heavens the stars looked down. The ancient forest slept in a haze and along the coast, like Titan sentries on watch, towered the ice crags. A deadly silence filled the cold night air.

A minute later a small boat put out from the shore and leaving a long, phosphorescent stream in its wake, disappeared into the frosty starlight.

V

The wind died down. The subdued rollers carried the broken and scattered remnants of the ice-fields with them like the wreckage of some gigantic ship. Clouds raced across the blue bowl of a sky studded with bright, scintillating stars, and the long northern night, as cold and transparent as the ice, lay over a dull rumbling sea that was

still angry and had not yet recovered from the recent storm.

Gradually the sea was freed of ice, only single floes here and there rocked on the waves. On one of these ice-floes the vague, black silhouette of a tall man stood out faintly against the blue background of the distant horizon.

This was the man called Magpie.

He was working skilfully with his harpoon, the flexible shaft lashing the cold water into foam. The awkward block of ice moved slowly forward. All around stretched the endless watery waste.

Magpie raised his head; through the thin frosty haze the Great Bear shone like gold—the Bear showed him the way. As Magpie worked hard with his pole pushing the heavy ice-floe forward, dark, tumbled thoughts filled his head: he had been carried far out to sea, the frost was fiercer than ever, for the second day he had eaten nothing. He worked harder with his harpoon pole and felt himself growing weaker. For a moment he stopped, took a mouthful of snow and looked round; the endless waste of waters stretched away into the blue half-light and disappeared.

The last light cloud-shadows raced across a frozen sky sparkling with myriads of stars. The boundless sea lay calm, the stars quivering in it.

Magpie felt that the end would be a bad one: the icy sea wrapt him round, the white frost stared motionless into his eyes and its sharp needles stung his chilled body.

In an effort to warm himself Magpie worked harder while confused thoughts ran through his head one after another. "Help me out, oh Lord... the children are small, can't help themselves... no strength for anything... who needs them.... No wife...." His head was filled with the thought that there was nothing at home, that if he had good hunting he would mend matters a little and would pay his debts to the man called Raven. Magpie would manage everything, but would he ever get back? He

remembered the log cabin, dark and smoky. Magpie recalled how he used to return from the hunt, and would bathe and warm his sinful body. He remembered how, as a boy, he went hunting with his father. The noisy surf beat on the shore and huge icebergs wandered through the sea.... He remembered the paths through the swamps and the birds of the air and the beasts of the forest that he had hunted. He remembered his poverty, and his thoughts turned bitter as he recalled his whole life. He again worked with his pole and mentally gauged the distance he still had to go: "No, I'll never make it!" And again he was sorry for himself. Surely he did not have to die like this?

Magpie could not believe it. Many a long year he had worked on the seas. He had managed to live for weeks, even for months, surrounded by sea, nothing else but ice and sky. It had happened on other occasions that he had been carried far out to sea without bread, without fire, without help, within a hair's breadth of death, and still he had won through. Those others, they would return home—to warm houses, children... good hunting... losses would be made good... but he would be carried far out to sea on a lifeless lump of ice. And he had a home and children and the hunting was good, but still he would not return! His heart ached, it would be a pity to die and yet he knew that he would freeze, he had no strength left. A heavy tear forced its way out of his eye and rolled slowly down his grim face, only to hang, a frozen dew-drop, from his ice-bound moustache. Raising his head he looked incomprehendingly, with dimming eyes, at the distant heavens with their cold brilliance as though he expected an answer from there. But the night hung silent over the frozen world.

The gleaming bowl of the heavens slowly but irrevocably continued its daily revolution around that tiny star at the end of the Bear's tail.

A thin, hazy cloudlet sped across the gleaming heavens, and the stars sparkled brightly through its phantom body, and from beyond its edge the northern lights burned menacingly, lighting up the sky with their flitting fairy-lights.

Magpie was coming to the end of his tether, weaker and weaker grew the movements of his long pole; his arms grew numb, he could not feel his legs, and his heavy head bowed lower and lower. If only he could sit and rest for just one minute, but no, he knew full well that the savage frost was closely following his every movement and the moment this movement ceased the frost would take him in its embrace and sear him through and through with its icy breath. Magpie fought against sleep and did not think of anything any more; his thoughts were mixed, torn to pieces and dispersed like wisps of lifeless mist in the wind. He realized that he was doomed, and again the picture of his distant home flashed through his mind, just flashed and passed away again. Magpie realized that it was already too late for anybody to come to his help, they would not be in time, would not hear him.

"I'm finished!... Oh, where are you...."

And that demented howl rudely disturbed the silence of the night, it swept across the even surface of the water and seemed to rise higher and higher until it was lost in the thin frosty haze. Only the distant ice-barrier dutifully echoed that useless cry for help and a tiny star leapt out of its place and rolled across the sky and again silence reigned.

The northern lights blazed on. In one half of the heavens the stars gleamed brightly but the other half was sunk in a dismal and menacing gloom where the stars had died out. Out of that darkness came a ball of white smoke as though from the muzzle of a gun, it spread and swiftly raced across the sky like a white sheet dotted with bright stars and disappeared at the zenith. Every time

that smoky cloud burst and spread across the sky it seemed that it should have been followed by a thunderous explosion that would shake the sleeping sea. But still that same unbroken silence filled the air. Endlessly, those fiery sheets burst from the gun muzzle and travelled swiftly, radiating all the colours that there are.

Sleep began to overtake Magpie. He grew tired of standing and squatted on his heels. A pleasant warmth spread through his body. "The frost must be easing up," he thought for a moment. Drowsiness made his thoughts somewhat hazy. Dimly, faintly, disconnected fragments of something long forgotten rose to the surface in the whirlpool of his memory but were soon lost again, drowned in the never-ending pictures of his past life.

There came a picture of some place deep in the tundra at dead of night. A hurricane raged in the darkness and its mad howl resounded dismally over a lonely, snowed-up tepee like a death knell. Frightened reindeer pressed to the very walls of the tepee. Inside the tepee he himself sat, Magpie, with a Samoyed and his family. Magpie sat on a pile of deerskins, a small keg in his hands: he was trading, he wanted to buy reindeer from the Samoyeds but they would not sell them, without their reindeer they would perish in the tundra. Magpie offered the Samoyed a glass of spirit and he brightened up, he gave him a second and he grew more amenable to Magpie's talk, he gave him a third and the Samoyed began to sing. He sang about everything his eye lighted on. He began drinking the spirit and sang: "Ach, vodka, good vodka!" Some logs were thrown on to the fire and he sang "Ach, fire, warm fire!" A puppy barked and he sang: "Ach, doggie, white doggie!" And Magpie's heart was heavy as he recalled those songs of long ago.

Magpie plied the Samoyed with spirit until he was drunk, he plied the Samoyed's wife with drink until she, too, was drunk and then he bought up all their reindeer

for a song. In the morning the storm died down. He drove all the reindeer to his place but gave the Samoyed three of them back so that he would not perish in the tundra. Magpie drove off and the Samoyed remained there in the tundra. And now Magpie could not get rid of the picture of that Samoyed: he looked at Magpie through the narrow slits of his eyes bleery from spirit and Magpie could not tell whether he was singing or weeping: "Reindeer, little reindeer.... Ach, reindeer!..." Magpie wanted to forget that scene, his head was in a whirl, thoughts were all mixed up, he wanted to get rid of those thoughts and give himself up to the drowsiness that made his mind hazy.

He shuddered. A long drawn-out crackle like a heavy artillery volley broke the silence. Far, far away a mass of ice, pressed hard by the frost, had split. The ice gave off a resounding echo that was repeated and rolled over the surface of the water.

For a moment he seemed to wake up. To his amazement he could not open his eyes, the lids were glued together. Like a distant gleam in the dark of night a vague consciousness of danger assailed him. A deathlike silence again filled the air and his former state of lethargy returned. He had grown tired of trying to lift his heavy eyelids. Again drowsiness cast a haze over his mind and disconnected thoughts flashed by in a long procession like light clouds on a moonlit night. He imagined that the dead sea had come to life, that the endless waste of water was softly breathing, that the thin vapour of its breath rose to the distant stars and that something unfathomable was going on in the depths. It seemed that the whole world had grown silent and the former life had become extinct, had been engulfed in that mysterious emptiness that was filled with the pulsation of another, unseen life. He dreamed of a soft, silent wind, a vague, scarcely perceptible ringing and a light mist that hovered over the sea.

And through the frosty haze Magpie, in his delirium, saw two bright waves that ran apart leaving a phosphorescent trail in their serpentine wake. And a half-transparent, vaguely indefinite boat bore down on him, not touching the waves. The ice-floe trembled, wavered, disturbing the calm surface of the sea; ever widening silver circles spread away from it. The stars reflected on the smooth surface trembled, jumped up and down and floated away in spots of quivering gold. The newly-risen moon stretched out to an ugly length, quivered and lay in a long line of light as far as the horizon.... And twilight fell softly over the sea and all was hidden....

Tucked into a thin, sparkling, frosty haze the arctic night dozed peacefully over the calm sea, glowing with all the majestic beauty of the North. Over all spread a star-spangled fabric flashing with the whimsical iridescence of its phosphorescent play. Bright stars swung to and fro, hanging in the dark vault of heaven. A bluish glow poured down from on high. A deathlike silence hung motionless over the cold sea and in that iridescent beauty was felt the lifeless cold of eternal death. A soft bluish light played over the limitless expanse of water on which a thin film of ice had formed, and in the frozen distance a human figure covered in white frost lay hunched up on a lonely ice-floe.

1889

In Port

I

THE STEAMER held by heavy, thick hawsers loomed huge and black against the wharf. The slim masts rose up sheer and graceful, their tips lost in the sky above. A low, smoke-blackened funnel, leaning slightly backward, was gloomily and silently emitting wisps of slightly curling smoke. Above the steamer the air shimmered and vibrated and a mighty dormant force could be felt emanating from its gaping, black bowels.

The dark cabin portholes gazed silently and blankly like the sleepy eyes of some giant body. There was nobody on the bridge where the handles of the telegraph stood out motionless and lonely. The chains twisted like serpents, the coiled ropes, the furled sails, and the emptiness

and desolation on the decks—all told of rest and repose after work that had gone on day and night sending shudders through that body of iron and steel that had fought against the elements over many a thousand versts.

And even now there was one place where rest was still a stranger. Wide gang-planks stretched from the steamer to the wharf. One after another, bending so low that they could not be seen under bales, boxes and bags, a string of barefooted men in ragged shirts and trousers passed up and down the gang-plank like a swarm of ants, the sweat pouring from under the loads they carried and falling in big drops on to the planks underfoot. They threw down their loads under a shed, straightened their backs for a second, wiped the perspiration from faces red with exertion and ran back to the steamer, where the open hatchway yawned like a black chasm.

The first mate stood at the hatchway marking the packages off in a notebook as they were unloaded. The man at the donkey-engine beside him pulled levers; the chains with noisy haste rattled down into the black gulf from a derrick projecting like a huge arm over the deck. From the dark depths, a dull voice, muffled by distance, seemed to come out of the bowels of the earth.

"St-o-o-p!. . ."

With a single turn of a lever the driver checked the donkey-engine and the chatter of the chain stopped as suddenly as if it had been cut off. Several people leaned over the hatchway and could vaguely make out men moving far down below, as though at the bottom of a high precipice. In the semi-darkness they were seen to seize hold of the crane hook and attach it to a number of barrels and boxes held together by ropes.

"Pull her up!" came from below.

A turn of a handle and the winch, lightly and easily, as though playing, began methodically taking in the chain. The chain ran upwards, and in the hatchway appeared

the awkward-looking, pot-bellied barrels, the huge packing cases, bumping against the edges of the open hatch. The whole load was brought out into daylight and only then could it be seen what a huge load it was. The derrick made a half-turn and the barrels and boxes were poised over the deck.

"Let her down!. . ."

For about a second the chain ran downwards and the huge mountain of boxes and barrels lay on the deck. Stevedores ran up, heaved the boxes on to obediently placed backs and began rolling the barrels. And the packing-cases, swaying importantly, heaving up and down as though feeling themselves masters of the situation, passed in procession down the gang-planks and were at any moment ready to crush, flatten, shatter the men who walked under them with trembling knees, but they reached the wharf safely and were flung down on to a huge pile of their brethren.

Again the cries of "Pull her up," "Let her down," "Stop," accompanied by the impatient rattle of the running chains as the donkey-engine puffed away, the derrick turned back and forth and there appeared on deck more and more bales, bundles, sacks, boxes and cases as though they were being pulled out of a bottomless pit and there would be no end to it all. No matter how big the steamer looked it was difficult to imagine the capacity of the huge holds hidden below the waterline.

The sun rose higher and higher, the shadows crawled towards the buildings, growing short and stumpy, and the heat began to make itself felt. A slight, silky ruffle disturbed the smooth surface of the sea that merged in the distance into the blue of the sky, which came down to meet it. The white seagulls resembled pieces of paper, and the black fishermen's boats were lonely black streaks on the gleaming, rippling sea. Steamers, schooners and lighters were huddled against the wharves. Upturned boats

on the shore displayed their splitting keels to the sky. Over all was a mingled sound of voices, the noise and rattle of chains, the panting of steam engines, the level stubborn howl of steamer sirens, exclamations, songs and curses. A clatter of carriage wheels over the stones came from the little town straggling along the shore, above which the mountains rose in thoughtful silence.

The stevedores had finished unloading but there was no time for rest, they had to start loading. Stacks of iron bars, boards, sacks of grain and barrels of wine were piled up on the wharf awaiting their turn. And again tired, perspiring men ran from the wharf to the ship, again the chain rattled, rising and falling in the open jaws of the ship's hold that swallowed up everything offered, the derrick turned and the monotonous cries of: "Stop," "Up" and "Down" started again. From the zenith the sun poured down its blinding rays on to the dazzling sea, on the steamers and wharves, on the little white houses sprinkled along the coast and on the mountains whose peaks stared silently into the unreachable distance.

II

She was about three years old, a little girl with blue eyes and flaxen hair, in a cotton frock and tiny yellow slippers. She ran about the wharf, a rosy patch in the bright sunlight, climbed over the jumble of bales, sacks and barrels, played with pebbles and stones scattered on the ground and then, covering her eyes with her hands, palms outwards, as though the sunlight hurt her, called out in a thin penetrating voice:

"I want to go to Mamma."

There was nobody on the wharf. The sacks of grain and piles of iron and timber stood motionless, the sea was scintillating.

"I want to go to Mamma."

That thin voice again resounded strangely along the wharf, over the water splashing sleepily on the beach, and flew into the shadow of an upturned barge lying on the beach, the bottom of which was rotten through and through and from which thundered forth a truly Homeric snore. A curly head lay motionless on the sand seemingly independent of the gigantic mountain of a body that rose up above it. The broad, hairy chest shuddered spasmodically in time with the snores. The projecting veins on the bare, twisted, unnaturally fat neck throbbed steadily and the two fists, crudely and incompetently hewn and badly finished off, lay quiet and heavy at the ends of the outstretched arms.

Beside that motionless body but paying no attention to it sat a Tartar with protruding ears and a shining, closely shaven head covered in spots. With his legs tucked up under him he swayed back and forth, softly and whiningly humming, his sorrowful and monotonous voice wheezing out something that was either a song or a plaint; rhythmically plying needle and thread he was mending his torn trousers.

Two others were playing cards—a young fellow with a drink-sodden, freckled face and a flat chest, and a tall, awkwardly built, ragged mountaineer with furtive eyes in a face burned black by the sun, and features that were handsome but sharp and rapacious.

"Pay up."

"What d'you mean? Show me your card."

"Hand over the cash, I said. You've lost, so pay up."

The sharp features of the mountaineer's face flashed with hatred, the finely chiselled nostrils of his hawk-like nose were distended, the pupils of his eyes gleamed.

"Hand over!..." The words were spat out gutturally through teeth that gleamed white under his moustache, and his dry, wiry and lithe body bent forward menacingly.

The youngster threw him five kopeks.

"Bastard!..."

They sat on the ground and continued dealing the impossibly greasy and bent cards, following each other's movements with burning avaricious eyes. Through the rotten bottom of the barge a patch of sunlight spread cautiously over the ground, the plaintive voice of the swaying Tartar and deafening bursts of snoring could be heard.

"I want to go to Mamma."

The Tartar raised his shaven head, his ears pointing in different directions.

"Hear that? A kid screaming."

The body that had lain motionless stirred, the snoring ceased, giving a strange impression of silence, and was replaced by sounds that echoed from the wharf and the town; then the gigantic mouth opened and yawned so expansively that the dust of rotting wood fell from the sun-gilded cracks in the barge.

"Vaska, is there any vodka left?"

"Your lead."

"Mine. Jack of spades."

The sound of a steamer whistle came from the sea.

"Not ours, is it?"

The mountaineer shaded his eyes with the palm of his hand and screwing up his eyes gazed out into a sea that was one stretch of dazzling radiance to the very horizon.

"It's not ours. The Azov Company's."

"Mamma ... I want Mamma."

Pimen rolled over his mountainous body.

"Is that a baby? How did it get here?... Too bad there's no vodka left."

"I tell you baby cry."

"How could it have got here?"

The Tartar bit off the thread, pulled on his trousers and stood up.

"Little baby fall in water and drown, what you look?"

He went over to the girl, squatted down on his heels and clicked his tongue.

"Oh, what big girl, what very nice girl!..."

"Want to go to Mamma."

Pimen and the mountaineer joined them, Vaska also came, frowning and yawning to show his independence, and pulling a grimace that said that all this had nothing to do with him. Pimen also squatted down and held out a rough horny dirt-begrimed hand.

"Come to me, girlie, what's your name?"

The huge, shaggy head on a colossal body that squatted clumsily on the ground, the hoarse voice and big black hands were so frightening that the girl still kept her eyes covered and screamed in a high-pitched, thin voice, so piercing that Pimen recoiled from her.

"Ach, how little imp went for me!"

"What for you touch? You see how she 'fraid," said the Tartar, pushing his companion aside.

"It's you she's afraid of, pig-face."

The watchmen came over from the wharf.

"Where'd that girl come from?"

"How do we know—from the town or from a ship. Either she's got lost, or someone's forgotten her, or they've left her.... She's not got sense enough to tell us who she is."

The tiny girl, surrounded by unknown people, covered her face with her hands, palms outwards, as a frightened bird covers itself with its wings; her baby breast heaved and trembled and clear, transparent tears poured out from under her hands. She did not cry loudly, she merely sobbed and whispered:

"Mamma... Mamma...."

"Such a little thing...."

"That's how they abandon them: the woman went away on the steamer and left the kid behind."

"Perhaps she forgot her. Now she's probably going frantic out there at sea but they won't turn the boat back."

"We ought to take her to the police and tell them."

"Why police?" exclaimed the Tartar, worried by the idea. "You go yourself to police. Why take tiny baby to police?"

He dived under the barge and returned in a few seconds triumphantly holding between his fingers a lump of sugar that had been gnawed all round. The child, however, would not take the sugar but kept on crying hysterically in long, choking, heart-breaking sobs.

The Tartar took the girl in his arms. Her whole body trembling like a leaf, the weak and exhausted child snuggled up against his shoulder. And strange it was to see those two heads together: one of them small, with waving blonde hair, the other huge with protruding ears, an angular head covered with tightly drawn, black-spotted skin.

"Listen, you blokes, they left her for the Tartar."

"So that's why he had his eyes on the shipper's wife."

"He'd play up to any of them, only his pants are torn."

"He's mended 'em.... Sat there for hours, whining...."

"He's the lady's man, all right. Now the children are finding their papa.... By night, a boy'll probably turn up."

"Ho, ho, ho.... Ha, ha, ha...."

"You chatter.... Play fool.... Maybe mother's gone to market, maybe to town.... She come and say: 'Where baby?' And I say: 'Come here, this your baby.' And she say: 'Thank you, Ahmet, here's ruble for you, go drink my health: little baby fall in water but you no let baby drown....' And I go and drink while you chatter...."

"He's smart, that pig-face," grunted the shaggy-headed Pimen. "He may be a Tartar but sometimes he reasons

as well as any Christian. Were you the only one who saw her? We saw her together and we'll all drink together."

"Yeh, and I'm not blind, either," announced Vaska in his whining voice, "I wasn't sleeping."

The child, exhausted by fear and crying, fell asleep. The Tartar laid her down carefully on some rags under the barge. They settled down to wait for the mother to come for her child, but still she did not come; instead a steamer came in which they had to unload.

Once more the winches screeched, the chains rattled, bales and boxes came out of the dark holds, and the monotonous, wearying shouts—"Up, down, stop"—began again.

They finished unloading the steamer by evening and the Tartar ran to the barge. From there came a thin, plaintive, sobbing voice. The little girl was sitting up and rubbing her tear-stained, wet face with her tiny fists.

"What you cry for, girlie? Don't cry. Ai, ai, don't cry, you make God's ears hurt him."

Pimen and the mountaineer, tired, dirty, perspiring and gloomy, joined them.

"You picked up the brat, now what're you going to do with it?"

The discouraged Tartar stood there in dismay. The girl continued helplessly sobbing.

"Well, you lop-eared son of Satan.... I'll take her by the leg and ... you won't even find the pieces! Take her to the police or she'll be howling here all night."

"Who you shouting at? Who goes to police at night? You big fool but your head very little. Why you no want drink vodka together?"

The Tartar squatted down and clicked his tongue twice.

"Ai, girlie, ai, big girlie!"

The girl sobbed and whispered one word.

"Mamma.... Mam-ma-a-a...."

Vaska brought bread, fish, cucumbers, water and vodka. They all sat on the ground in a circle and began their supper. The Tartar broke up some bread and gave it to the girl who swallowed it greedily, scarcely pausing to chew it. The stevedores ate in silence, they ate a lot, tearing the hard, dried fish with their strong teeth. By the time the bottle of vodka was finished they became more talkative and more kindly. Pimen even gave up his torn and greasy sheepskin coat on which the Tartar put the baby to bed. At midnight they were awakened again and they worked until four o'clock in the morning.

The next day the Tartar, as soon as he woke up, began looking towards the town, then towards the wharf to which the ships came in, expecting that at any moment somebody would come and ask about the child; but passengers alighted from the ships, all sorts of people came from the town and nobody so much as hinted that a child had been lost.

"This evening she must go to police," said the Tartar to himself. But it so happened that he did not take the child to the police but still had vague expectations of something happening.

Another two days passed. The girl grew accustomed to her new surroundings and her voice could be heard all day long in the vicinity of the barge. And the stevedores got used to her, too, especially big, clumsy, kind-hearted Pimen. He brought her white bread and milk in a vodka bottle from which the milk smelt of vodka and after drinking it the girl fell into a long and unbroken sleep. When he was in a good mood he allowed her to clamber all over his gigantic body and the girl climbed over him as she would over a mountain. Vaska just twittered and said that the Tartar was getting a harem ready for himself while the mountaineer took no notice of her at all as though she were something quite useless—and the girl was afraid of them both and kept away from them.

III

The slanting rays of the setting sun streamed in under the barge lighting up the huge body of Pimen who was lying on his stomach smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, the Tartar sitting with his legs crossed under him, Vaska and the mountaineer at their eternal card game, and the remnants of the dried fish, the cucumber parings and an empty vodka bottle.

"Already the fifth year," said Pimen, gazing pensively at the wide expanse of sea, "and I can't get away... seem to have got stuck here. And the family's waiting...."

He stopped and blew the air out of his lungs with a long, loud noise reminiscent of a blacksmith's bellows slowly collapsing after the handle had been dropped.

"And I came here for one summer to help put the farm to rights. Now I've got to divide up the land with the boy—they've probably married him off without waiting for me.... What sort of a life is this, no use to man or beast, no proper work and no proper rest, time just doesn't exist. It would be good to walk behind the plough again, or take a turn with the pitchfork.... E-e-eh!"

His cigarette of coarse tobacco grew rapidly shorter with sudden flashes and occasional bursts of flame.

"I'll save up thirty rubles and be off to the village. They've already given me up, I suppose, not a sign of me for five years.... They'll all be surprised and glad, and then we'll have a smoke.... My family's pretty big, son's probably married, it's time to marry off our daughter and the baby'll be over four: when I came away my wife was in the family way.... But I can't get away from here."

And again the bellows slowly and noisily collapsed.

"I stay one more summer and go back," said the Tartar who had been listening indifferently to his companion, "wife all alone on farm, got two horse, three cow, now I've told her to buy three sheep."

Pimen's huge body sat up angrily.

"You a heathen devil! Call yourself a pal? Can't get a drink out of you. Stingy devil! As soon as you get your money, you swine, off you go to the post-office. Can't you have a drink with your pals just once in a while?"

The Tartar turned his bored eyes on him.

"What for you bark at me? The pub's your boss, I no want boss, I take one drink and send other money home. Waiting for me at home, oi, how they waiting. Little girl wait for me at home."

His narrow eyes became even narrower slits and the wrinkles spread over his face. He glanced at the child playing nearby. She was imitating the stevedores, carrying a bundle of rags on her back and lisping the curses that she heard all day long. Day after day passed and they no longer spoke about the necessity of handing her over to the police and had even forgotten that they had expected somebody to appear and reward them.

"D'you expect to get anything out of that horsemeat eater?" Vaska put in, interrupting his card game. "The Tartar swine! Drinks by himself like a heathen: takes a half-quartern and then begins wondering whether he hasn't drunk too much!... Heathen devil!... A nine.... Hand over!"

The Tartar scratched his back, yawned, glanced out to sea and then crawled into a corner to sleep. Pimen rolled himself another cigarette.

IV

The calm, slightly ruffled sea disappeared into the white morning haze that still lay lazily on the horizon, and the sun standing just above it seemed to survey the bright face of the sea.

Although there was nothing on the sea, just a peaceful, bright expanse of water, something irrepressibly joyful

and youthful filled the whole atmosphere and it seemed that a silent song of jubilation swept forward to meet the boundless blue sky, to meet the sun, to meet the young day.

A strange sound, a sound that was at first inexplicable, flew along the shore. It came from afar, from the direction of that smoky haze, just the ghost of a sound, elusive and fugitive. There was a hint of something left unsaid, a hint of mystery in it. Then it came again, this time more tangible, leaving a lasting impression in the radiant air. It held on steadily for a long time, without any break, weakened by distance but persistent and uniform like the sound of a singing kettle, giving the impression that far away, beyond that mysterious curtain of haze, there were living beings who felt the joy of that morning, who were drawing nearer and making their presence known.

People on shore said:

"The *Igor* is coming."

A black dot appeared faintly through white haze and it was impossible to say what it was—a bird or a log floating on the sea, or merely an optical illusion. Gradually the dot swelled into a dark patch which slowly took form: the thin lines of masts appeared, a tiny, toy funnel showed up black and from it welled a long stream of smoke.

The sun bathed and luxuriated in the blue depths, displaying its brilliance and sinking its blinding rays in the water; the haze was rapidly dispelled, flying away from the sun, from the warmth, from the joy of the new-born day.

When all trace of the haze had gone the sea was opened up to the very horizon where it met the sky, and over it resounded a rude hoarse voice that had nothing in common with the freshness of the joyful morn, nothing attraetive, fascinating and alluring. That coarse, somewhat raucous voice reverberated loudly, disturbing the melody

of morning, and telling of one thing only, that there is nothing but toil, ceaseless, exhausting, heavy toil. Those to whom this reminder was addressed heard it and came out on to the shore.

The Tartar was there with his shaven head and protruding ears, and Vaska with his drink-sodden face, and the mountaineer and Pimen, shaggy and monumental, his gigantic body showing through the rents in his shirt and trousers. And a tiny, swift-moving, lively patch of colour ran about the beach, and a thin, lisping voice made itself heard amongst coarser voices with their crude speech, curses and laughter.

The steamer did not seem to draw nearer but rather to grow and expand. It waxed fat and grew heavy, turning into a black monster, the funnel swelled and belched black swirling smoke, the masts swelled and lengthened abruptly against the clear blue of the sky, and white boats hanging from their davits came into sight. The tiny figures of people could be discerned as they crowded against the rail, moved about the deck or stood still on the bridge. The screw stopped and the huge ship moved silently towards the coast driving a big, swollen, transparent wave before it.

Wooden balls flew from the side of the ship followed by thin lines, these were seized by people waiting on the wharf, and the ends of the hawsers fell into the water.

Despairing, hysterical shrieks interrupted the silent anticipation that usually pervaded the wharf and disturbed the usual routine of tying up the vessel. A woman struggling in the strong arms of the sailors was trying to break away and jump overboard, and her cries were answered from the shore by a shrill, joyful, babyish cry:

"Mamma, Mamma...."

The screw turning in reverse churned up the water and the big black hull turned slowly, coming to rest opposite the wharf to which she was pulled by the hawsers.

The gangway was let down and the woman, laughing, crying, with a tear-swollen face, rushed ashore. She seized hold of the child from whose lips came only one word:

"Mamma. Mamma. Mamma."

A crowd gathered round them.

"She's found her girl!"

"She was beside herself with grief. She wanted to jump into the sea when she discovered the girl was missing. She thought she'd been drowned. She just went crazy."

"A mother, no wonder."

Nearby stood the Tartar, dirty, ragged and grinning.

"She live whole week with us. Fed her, sorry for her.... Why go to police? No need go to police.... Little baby, fell in water, she drown but I no let her drown.... You her mother, eh? I got little girl like that, so big...." and he held his hand a little way off the ground. "Mother, yes...."

The little girl lisped away and her mother kissed her madly.

"Mamma, we'll take the boys with us, nice boys.... Mamma, there are lots of stones here. And Uncle Pim has such a big head.... He can carry a lot of trunks.... Mamma!..."

She lisped away mingling her baby words with profanity that she pronounced in a funny babyish way that made it seem more cynical and repulsive. There was some laughter amongst the people standing there.

"You've learned that quickly enough...."

"That they can learn...."

"They don't learn their prayers, but that they can learn."

"You need a cane for that...."

The mother went as pale as a sheet and looked at the child with wide-open eyes, filled with horror.

"Oh, you awful people. Phew...."

She spat in the Tartar's face, took the child in her arms and ran back on to the ship. The crowd laughed uproariously.

"Did you get your reward, Ahmet?"

"You owe us a drink, Ahmet. You promised."

"Ahmet will get fat on his reward, he'll be a gentleman."

"A real lady's man. . . ."

"Take a good look, perhaps you'll find another waif, it's a profitable business."

"Hi, stevedores. . . ."

The winch clattered, the chains rattled and went ringing down into the hold.

"Sto-o-op!"

Passengers got off and others boarded the steamer.

"Up! Down! Sto-o-op!"

And the sun still hung blindingly clear over the sea, which, bright and calm, with a slightly ruffled surface, spread far away into the distance.

1903

Into the Storm

I

"Oi-oi-oi-oi!. . ." ANDREIKA'S piercing howls carried across the sparkling, smooth surface of the sea as the boy lay writhing in the boat. "Grandad, I won't do it again!"

Grandad, a thickset man with shaggy, greying eyebrows overhanging a wrinkled face tanned to leather by the sun, wind and salt water, held the boy by the scruff of the neck with one hand and used the other to beat him painfully with a tarred rope's end that bit into the boy's body; then he flung him into the bottom of the boat. Andreika stood up sobbing, leaned over the gunwale and began hauling in the wet nets as they appeared above the water.

Scarcely perceptible glassy ripples spread over a sea of dazzling brilliance. The burning sun, high in the heav-

ens, was painful to the eyes. The black hull of the boat, beginning to ooze tar, the criss-cross of ropes stretching up to the mast and also dripping tar, the drooping sail, black with dirt and tar, formed a clear-cut black silhouette in that motionless sultry air.

No land was visible.

Andreika, with an angry, frowning face, continued hauling in the nets, firmly but carefully pulling out every fish that had become entangled in their meshes.

It had been at two o'clock in the morning, when the stars were just beginning to pale, that Andreika had pushed off from the shore with Grandad. One of those light breezes that spring up before dawn had carried their boat quietly out to sea. When dawn broke and rosy streaks spread over sky and water and the calm, unruffled sea opened up to the very horizon, the wind dropped. They had to resort to the oars. Andreika and Grandad rowed turn about. At first Andreika worked easily and lightly but an hour passed, a second hour and then he began to tire. Every time he threw his body back and the oars splashed into the transparent, rosily iridescent water it seemed to him that he would not be able to straighten his body again so intense was the pain in his back and in his arms: but still he plied his oars again and again and the boat crawled forward as slow as a tortoise. All the time Grandad had been sitting motionless in the stern but at last he said:

"That's enough, Andreika!"

Andreika was glad as he scrambled along the rocking boat to the stern while Grandad sat down to the oars and without a word began steadily rowing. Andreika steered, watched the long streams of water that ran off the oars and at Grandad strongly and rhythmically swaying as he rowed; as he wiped the sweat off his face he gave himself up entirely to the pleasure of rest.

The sun rose from somewhere beyond the sea lighting

up the calm, even surface of the water. A new day of burning heat without the faintest breath of wind had begun.

Big, round blocks of wood with flags attached to them soon came into sight, floating on the surface of the water; these were the floats of the fishing nets. They rowed towards one of these floats and by means of the rope attached to it hauled up the end of a net and, leaning over the gunwale, began pulling the boat along the net which ran for hundreds of yards below the surface of the water. As Andreika hung far out over the gunwale he enjoyed looking down into the transparent water, where from time to time he saw a flash of something white that quivered and pulled to one side the rising net, until at last a fish caught by its gills in the mesh appeared on the surface, beating and thrashing the water. Andreika seized the fish by sticking his fingers into the tender, rosy gills, pulled it out of the net and threw it into the bottom of the boat where there was a little water. The fish, mad from pain, fear and despair, began to thrash about, splashing water on all sides, unable to understand what was happening to it and striving to find a way out of that awful, confined space where it could not breathe with its torn and bloody gills.

The sun rose higher and higher and an intense heat stood blinding and immobile over a sea that was languid under the burning sky. Andreika, exhausted by the heat, for want of something better to do began talking to the fish as he pulled them out of the net.

"Ho-ho, my little herring, you'll soon go into the brine tub and won't wriggle so much! Get into the boat, wriggler! The fat on that carp; why, you've gorged till you're pot-bellied. Come on, come on, out with you, don't be so stubborn, pot-belly, you can't get away from me, anyhow! Out you come!..." and with the greatest difficulty Andreika pulled out a huge fish and held it up with both hands.

"Look, Grandad, what a belly he's got!"

He had scarcely opened his mouth before the huge carp, at first dead still from its astonishment at finding itself in the open air, lashed out with all its strength, slipped out of the boy's hands, flopped into the water and with a flash of its tail was gone.

It was then that Andreika's desperate howls spread across the sea for Grandad, without a word, had got up from his place, taken the tarred rope's end, folded it several times and cruelly beaten the boy.

II

Andreika had neither father nor mother. As long as he could remember he had lived with Grandad Agafon in the little white house under the big willow tree. To one side of the house there was white sand and blue sea and on the other side, as far as the eye could see, the empty, treeless steppe covered with coarse burned-up grass and wormwood and intersected by gullies and hollows washed out by the spring floods.

Some twelve years before this story opens Grandad Agafon had been living in that house with his family, his wife and five children. Then came an epidemic of diphtheria and Grandad's five children all died in one week.

One winter night Grandad Agafon and his wife were sitting alone in the little white house. A fierce blizzard beat at the black windows. Agafon was thinking morosely of something as he sat mending his nets while his wife pottered around the stove. Somebody knocked at the window. Grandad Agafon opened the door and saw a woman in beggar's clothes standing there shivering and covered with snow, her face white and haggard from the cold; in her arms she held a tiny child wrapped in rags, blue with cold but no longer crying. Stuttering and unable to speak

properly through her frozen lips the woman begged for a night's shelter. They took her in and fed her. As the baby grew warmer it filled the house with its cries and Agafon's wife, standing over the baby, wiped her tears away with her apron as she recalled her own dead children.

The woman told them that she came from Orel Gubernia and was on her way to the Kuban to search for her husband who had gone there six months before and had not written to her. She had eaten up everything they had and had at last set out to look for him. On her way she had lived on what she could beg, at some of the stations she had managed to persuade conductors to take her a few stations further on by train, and good people had given her lifts on their carts as she went from village to village. And so she had made her way to Yeisk. She had left Yeisk early in the morning, had lost her way in the steppe and as night came on the blizzard began; the woman had already made her preparations for death when she saw the distant light of that lonely house.

That night the woman was taken ill, in her fever she was delirious, she tossed from side to side and screamed. Three times Agafon's wife gave her holy water to drink and sprinkled her with it, but still she got worse and worse and on the evening of the next day she died. Agafon and his wife adopted the baby she had left.

Andreika dimly remembered his foster-mother, a kindly, elderly woman who had bathed him, fed him and rocked him to sleep in the cradle that hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room. He also remembered the time when he was about four years old; some people had come into the house, lifted up his foster-mother from the bench on which she slept, placed her on the table under the icons, lit candles and had then taken her away somewhere leaving him alone with Grandad Agafon. He also recalled how Grandad Agafon, every time he went to sea, took

him to a village in a gully out in the steppe, some three versts or so from the seashore, and left him there with a kinswoman, Grandma Spiridonikha. When the boy was six years old Grandad began to take him to sea with him and Andreika often slept in the bows of the boat on a heap of straw that Grandad had placed there for him, the sea birds whirling above him, the sun shining and the spray flying over his head.

At the age of seven Andreika already began to help Grandad in all his work. They got up early, at about three in the morning. Andreika would hurriedly splash his face with cold water, wipe it on his shirt, cross himself towards that part of the sky in which the morning star burned brightly and hurriedly gabble the Lord's Prayer and "Holy, Holy," the only two prayers he knew. Then Andreika would carry dried cow-dung into the house, light the stove, peel potatoes, clean the fish and boil them. After breakfast they would put out to sea.

Both at sea and at home Grandad Agafon made Andreika do everything that he did and on equal terms: set the sails, row, mend, spread, gather in and let out the nets, take the fish off the hooks and so on. And Andreika did everything, straining himself to the utmost at work that was beyond his strength. Grandad punished Andreika cruelly for every blunder, oversight or clumsy movement. The boy had only to set the rudder incorrectly or be late in pulling in or letting out the sail for Grandad to stand up immediately and without a word to take the tarred rope's end and mercilessly flay him so that the weals on his body never healed. Andreika had a thin sunburned face and he was, in general, small and thin.

His life passed in endless monotony: around him there was nothing but the sea, the sky, the steppe and the shore. The shore was empty and bare, with the washed-out clay mouths of the gullies and the sandy spits and

shallows. Nevertheless the whole of that desert space was lively and inhabited for Andreika.

Marmots whistled and scampered across the steppe or stood immobile like posts beside their holes; kites, hawks, and harriers swept through the air, casting shadows on the dried-up grass, falcons with slightly quivering wings hung motionless in the air; over the mounds of the steppe floated the black outlines of the morose and lonely eagles. Raucous-voiced white seagulls flitted over the seashore, snatching at the fish thrown out of the nets and at times almost seizing it from the fisherman's hands; in spring and autumn there was the constant hubbub of myriads of birds of passage.

The sea, however, had the greatest and most varied population. Here sterlets, sturgeon, herring, several kinds of carp and roach and other fish swarmed in shoals; the sands were teeming with water bugs and crabs. Towards the end of July the sea began to "blossom" and at night was phosphorescent. The crests of the waves, the wake left by the boats, the widening circles made by every stroke of the oars, the line of surf on the seashore, the spray, every drop of sea-water aroused out of its state of repose shone with a bluish light. To Andreika it seemed that this mysterious, flickering, suddenly appearing and just as suddenly disappearing bluish light was in some strange way connected with all the dead and drowned people who had ever found their graves in the sea.

Grandad Agafon was silent and morose, but when he spoke about the inhabitants of the sea the wrinkles disappeared from his face, his grey eyes looked kindly from under his over-hanging eyebrows and he was ready to talk about them for days on end.

"Grandad, where do so many fish come from? We keep on catching them all the time and still they come. There are so many people fishing, why, you can't put an oar into the water, there are so many nets."

"God breeds them, God breeds them, hasn't God got place enough for them, he made so much water so that fish could breed to feed the people."

"Does the fish know that it is being caught?"

"Of course it does.... Fish, for example, talk like we are now, tell how they met one another, and tell each other all they know about where the nets are and how they're set; only they talk their own language, of course, it's not given to us to understand them.... Only those who've been drowned and lie at the bottom of the sea, they know how the fish talk because the fish aren't afraid of them, they know that corpses can't give them away and so they swim around talking to each other."

Andreika didn't speak on such occasions but just sat and stared at Grandad with wide-open eyes. He could imagine the dark, blue depths of the sea, the vague, yellow sea-bed and on it the bloated body of a drowned man, all blue and with open, staring eyes and around him the fish swimming, their gills vibrating and drinking in the salt water, busy telling each other what was happening and where. They talked about him, about Andreika, of how he was sitting up there in the boat with Grandad Agafon and dropping nets into the water.

All this was a little bit horrifying for Andreika. Before this whenever he was in the boat his world had ended with the surface of the water and he had never worried about what was *there*, in the depths. *There* was simply water, and *from there* the nets brought up fish. Now it turned out that the tremendous, awful depths were not inhabited by those silent, helplessly writhing fish in the boat, fish that he pulled out of the nets as they came up, but by rational beings that talked and defended themselves against all evils and misfortunes in the same way as people did here on the surface. Overhead the sun shone, clouds passed by, the wind blew, and in the depths a mysterious and unfathomable life

went on, hostile to Grandad and Andreika—and this filled him with awe.

"The Lord made everything wisely," continued Grandad Agafon. "We say that the carp is just a dumb fish and nothing more. But if you drag the nets to the shore and drag there all the fish that are in the nets, if there's carp amongst them they'll almost all get back into the sea again. As soon as he feels that he's got nets all round him, the carp starts dashing backwards and forwards for all he's worth and pokes his nose into the nets till the strings creak; and if the net's an old one he'll break through and take all the fish with him; if he sees that he can't break the net he'll jump out of the water so's to jump over the net. If you lift the nets high out of the water near the shore and he sees that he's in a tight spot and likely to get pulled out of the net at any moment he dives down and sticks his nose into the sand and mud under the net, and although the net's heavy and weighted down with stones it slides over his smooth back, sometimes even takes the skin off and all he does is swish his tail and away he goes."

"And so the carp's a clever fish?"

"And how! The Lord sees that people are destroying fish without number, it's awful the number they catch! He sees that soon all the fish will be gone so he gave the carp intelligence. Man's smart, but the fish is smarter."

Then Grandad would get more enthusiastic and raise his brows still higher.

"The fish swim the seas," he would say, "they poke into all the corners looking for food. But where is there pasture for them in the sea? They get hold of a worm here or eat one of their brothers there; but in the rivers there's all kinds of food for them, as much as they want: and there's mud on the river bottoms, too. In the rivers there's all kinds of carrion and other filth. Worms and

things breed there. The rain washes roots and branches out of the forests—in a word everything that grows. In former times the fish used to come up the rivers, especially up the Don, to feed, and they came in shoals. When there were more people they put nets across the rivers to catch the fish, and caught them in millions. And then there was talk amongst the fish in the river; you can't go up the rivers, they said, you'll get caught. And the talk spread over the whole sea and the fish stopped coming up the Don to their pastures. And there came a law which said that all over Russia nobody should catch fish one day a week, to give the fish a rest: from six in the evening on Saturday until six in the morning on Monday nobody is allowed to catch fish. And what d'you think! All the blessed week there isn't a single sea fish coming up the Don because they know there's fishing there five days on end. Saturday evenings they come up from the sea in big swarms and turn back Sunday nights, only they don't all have time to get to the sea. The fishermen who catch in the mouth of the river know that all the week you won't see any salt-water fish in the river but on Monday morning all the fish there are try to get back and there they just pack into the nets—that's the fish that were too late to get back. That's how it is.... Man's smart but the fish are smarter...."

Grandad usually ended his stories by saying:

"To tell the truth the fish are getting fewer, year by year there are fewer of them.... That's because there are more and more fishermen, a terrible number of fishermen, nets everywhere you look...."

Grandad's shaggy eyebrows would again drop to their normal position and he would become his usual morose, self-absorbed and unsociable self.

Grandad and Andreika worked without let-up, enjoying neither holidays nor proper rest and everything they earned Grandad drank up.

As soon as they got home with the catch Grandad sold the fish to the middlemen, gave Andreika strict instructions to stay home and mend the nets, caulk or tar the boat, sharpen hooks and fasten them to the lines or mend the sail while he went off to a big village where there was a market and there caroused until he had drunk up the last kopek of his earnings and the last rag off his back.

As soon as Grandad had turned his back Andreika dropped the nets, the hooks or the unstitched sail and ran off to that village in the steppes that lay some three versts away and there wandered through the vegetable gardens, stole cucumbers, caught sparrows, had fist fights with the village boys and always went to see Grandma Spiridonikha. She treated him to pies stuffed with carrots and poppy-seed cakes and told him tales about woodsprites, witches and watersprites, tales about foreign countries and about cities that lay on the far shore of the sea.

"The houses over there are big and tall," said Grandma, stroking Andreika's head with her work-roughened hand as he sat at her feet, doing justice to the carrot pie but never taking his eyes off her, "and in them live only rich gentlemen who wear nice clothes and all the year round don't do any work."

"And don't they catch fish?"

"Fish! Why, they wouldn't even sweep out a room!"

"Granny, I went across to that side with Grandad, to Taganrog it was: the houses were ever so big, there were golden crosses on the churches and on the sea-front there were ladies out walking, all their heads covered in feathers.... Granny, I saw an Ingliss ship, there were gentlemen travelling on it and they kept looking at us through their glasses."

For some time Andreika ate in silence.

"Granny, where do the water bugs come from? When you walk along the beach and your foot sinks into the sand they just crawl out of it."

"Out of the water, sonny, that vermin comes out of the water. Take another pie, poor little orphan, it'll do you good."

"Granny, Grandad says my mother was frozen to death near our house."

"She died, sonny, she died; she died from the frost, it was awful cold that night and a blizzard blowing, you couldn't see a thing. Poor Akulina Mitrevna, may her soul rest in peace, managed to protect you, her poor orphan, so did Grandad Agafon, may he live long."

"Grandad's always beating me, Grandma, he hits me so that it hurts. If he doesn't stop hitting me, I'll run away from him."

"It's for your own good, you silly boy, it's for your own good, he's sorry for you when he hits you, he's teaching you what's good for you and don't you contradict him."

Grandma Spiridonikha was the only person in the world with whom Andreika felt at home.

Grandad Agafon would return home ragged, morose and bad-tempered; he would find the untouched nets and sail and then he would fall on Andreika so fiercely that the boy would scarcely be able to walk for a whole week.

III

The sun beat down unbearably. Above a sea that reflected the blue sky in its unfathomable depths the hot air hung motionless in a state of utter stagnation. The black boat with the tar oozing from it and its idle, drooping sail seemed to be hanging in space with another boat, exactly the same, standing below it, masts downwards.

Never once straightening his back, Andreika helped Grandad pull out the numerous fish caught in the net that ran along the side of the boat. His face was burning, his mouth half open and big drops of perspiration fell into the sea. A whole mountain of gaping, quivering fish lay piled up in the boat that already sat deep in the water.

After his terrible beating Andreika felt the pain of the searing weals on his back and dismal thoughts filled his head. At first he devoted all his bad temper to the carp that had so cunningly got him into trouble.

"All right, you fat-bellied devil," he thought angrily, "if I get you again, you won't get away from me, I can tell you; I'll stuff a fist into each of your gills and then see how you can twist. Then I'll get my own back. . . ."

As the cunning carp very wisely avoided falling into Andreika's hands, his thoughts took a new direction.

"Am I *his* son or a slave or what that *he* should beat me with anything he happens to lay his hands on? Oi, it burns, seems like he beat the shirt off me. I'll run away, by God, I will. I can go to the town and get a job or join the fishermen on shore pulling in the seines, let him get on without me. And I won't go away without doing something—I'll make a little hole in the boat and stuff it with a rag and then go and lie on the mound in the steppe and watch. And when he gets out to sea the water'll wash the rag out and he'll sink. He'll sink and he'll shout: 'Andreika, I'm drowning!' And I'll shout back at him: 'Aha, d'you remember how you flayed me, tore the shirt off my back?. . .'"

The heat and fatigue gradually got the better of Andreika and his indignation began to die down. Grandad had no idea of Andreika's intrigues and stood calmly sucking his pipe in the stern as he pulled the fish out of the net. The old man worked methodically, with great concentration. He did not like chatter. He was satisfied

with the day's catch and his shaggy eyebrows went up a little bit. He hoped that by the evening they would be able to inspect all the nets and return home at night.

Suddenly Andreika heard his voice.

"Andreika, drop the net and set the sail!"

Andreika stared at the old man: what was wrong with him? A half of the nets hadn't been inspected—apparently a shoal had packed them, there were so many fish, in any case, they never went home before night.... The old man did not like to repeat his orders so Andreika quickly dropped the net with the fish back into the water and began straightening out the sail and its tangled tackle.

"Lower it half-way and reef it from the bottom."

Andreika hastily obeyed, not daring to ask the old man questions. Usually they only reefed the sail and set it half-way when there was a heavy storm, so that they would be able to shorten sail when the wind got too strong. But now there was that same motionless, torrid heat all round them, it was difficult to breathe, and the unreachable heights and unfathomable depths, one opposite the other, still shone with the pale blue of two skies, and the water between them was invisible to the eye.

"Take the oars!"

Andreika obediently took the oars and began to row, the sweat pouring off him.

Not very high above the sea floated a dazzlingly white little cloud with ragged edges, like a piece of cotton wool that had been torn off from somewhere. This fast-moving cloudlet completely upset the general impression of sultry immobility and repose that predominated. Grandad watched the cloudlet, and then the horizon where sky and water merged into the distant blue; from it round, fluffy white clouds came rolling, tumbling over each other. They hurriedly gathered together in a manner that was inexplicable in that absolute calm.

Andreika, in pain and panting from the terrific heat and the strain of his work, began to feel a strange uneasiness. Clouds, shining silver on one side and looking ominously black on the other, appeared in quick succession in a sky that a minute before had been clear. Grandad, who had been urging on Andreika all the time, took the oars himself and the heavily laden boat moved more quickly in the direction from which the shore should appear.

From where the clouds had appeared, a dark narrow streak of countless ripples suddenly spread across the surface of the sea and, growing longer and longer, soon overtook the boat. At that moment the wind came up, flapped the sail, bellied out the shirt on Andreika's back and swept further on with the tiny ripples that darkened the clear surface of the sea.

Again the motionless, sultry air, the mirror-like surface of the sea and the helplessly drooping sail.

Grandad, glum and frowning, got up, shipped the oars carefully, took his coat from under the seat, put it on, belted it round himself very tightly, took his seat in the stern, passed the sheet through a ring-bolt beside him and took the tiller.

The sea was soon covered with patches of dark ripples alternating with patches of bright, smooth water over which the shadows of the clouds raced with elusive rapidity.... Suddenly the sea darkened over the whole of that limitless expanse, from edge to edge.

The wind, whistling in their ears and sending the cold through their bodies, instantly filled the sail; the boat, raising a wave before its bows, was carried forward noisily, almost keeping pace with the scurrying cloud shadows. A long line of foam spread in their wake.

Despite all the effort of the wind, now almost a hurricane, it was unable to stir up the calm sea immedi-

ately, although the water grew darker and darker in colour. Grandad, however, knew all the treachery of those sudden summer storms. They gathered in fury a long way away and then, bearing down, brought with them huge, ready-made waves that lashed and swirled furiously, breaking up a surface that a moment before had been perfectly calm. For this reason Grandad, at the risk of upsetting the boat, gave the sail full advantage of the wind and they were carried along at so great a speed that it dazzled them, and the foaming water flew past them as it would past a moving train. The faint outline of the distant shore became clearer and clearer.

And the waves did come. They came like a menacing army, with white, nodding heads, in green ranks of heaving masses of water, and hell broke loose.

The boat dipped its bows into the water. The waves, huge waves with sharp crests curving forward and preceded by masses of spray torn from them by the wind, bore down on the boat, hissing and roaring, never stopping, in a constant procession. Seething green crests time and again burst over the gunwales. The ropes were stretched taut and the sail, bending the mast and thrumming under the great strain, was soon soaked by the spray. The tremendous noise reached up to the very sky, across which low, grey, ragged clouds, like clots of dirty cotton wool, raced hurriedly along, a noise so great that neither the creaking of all the boat's joints nor a human voice could be distinguished.

As Andreika clung to the mast he could see Grandad's lips moving but could not hear a word. Clinging tightly to the vibrating mast he looked at the mutinous, seething waves that poured down without number and without end on to their lonely, helpless boat. The boat would heel over till the edge of the beating sail dipped in the water, then she would right herself and rise on the crest of a wave. At such moments Andreika could

see the shore, several versts away, the old willow-tree and the little white house on the shore.

Andreika was not particularly frightened, he was used to storms, but some tenseness within him filled his whole being. He was so accustomed to obeying Grandad and to trusting him blindly when at sea that he did not think of the danger, although the waves breaking over the gunwale were gradually filling the boat with water, and she rose more and more heavily with the waves. Andreika began bailing out but it was of little avail.

Grandad sat in the stern almost invisible in the cloud of spray and wind-driven foam, steering and letting out the sail every time the wind sent the boat heeling over. The old man's stern, wrinkled face, wet with spray, was grim and concentrated. He made a sign to Andreika, who was being tossed from side to side by the rocking of the boat, and the boy, on his hands and knees in the water, made his way through the fish to where the old man sat in the sternsheets. When he got there the old man bent down and shouted in his ear:

"Throw the fish overboard!"

Andreika looked at the old man with wide-open eyes but Grandad gave him a shove. With trembling hands the boy began heaving the still living, writhing fish out of the boat. Only now did he realize the full extent of the danger which threatened them and he was seized with despair. Holding on to a thwart with one hand he threw the fish out hurriedly with the other, weeping bitterly and wailing plaintively through his tears.

"Ee-ee-ee-ee . . . we're drowning . . . help . . . h-h-help . . . we're drowning!. . ."

The wind angrily carried away his plaint and the waves, breaking against the sides of the boat, sent up tall white columns of spray.

Andreika threw all the fish overboard.... The boat flew on more lightly.... The shore drew nearer and nearer.... They could already see the rain-washed clay of the gullies, the yellow sand of the shore and the blackening skeletons of old boats on the beach.... Andreika began to pray as he bailed out the water. He prayed to that grey-bearded old man depicted on the time-darkened icon in the corner of the church before which Grandad always placed his candles. And Andreika expected that at any moment their boat would become lighter, and that the foam-capped crests of the waves would stop breaking over them. But the watery mountains still rolled noisily on, the foam flew and the dirty-coloured clouds raced along.

A sudden burst of wind, screaming through the rigging and tearing off the crests of the waves, bent the sail down low, the boat heeled helplessly over on to one side and a huge wave dashed over the gunwale.

Andreika, doused from head to foot, grasped the mast with both hands, gasped from the salt water that filled his mouth. The old man, an earthy paleness on his sun-tanned face and his lower jaw trembling violently, leaned frantically with his chest on the high gunwale of the boat. The boat straightened up but was already half-filled with water and with the greatest difficulty rose to the crest of the oncoming waves that were lashing it more and more frequently. Every moment Andreika expected that they would go to the bottom. Ghastly fear took hold of him. On his hands and knees Andreika crawled towards Grandad.

"Grandad, I'm scared...."

The old man's face was set, deathly pale, and his lower jaw trembled; he lugged Andreika into his seat and pushed the tiller and the end of the sheet into his hands.

"The willow, make for the willow!"

The old man shouted his loudest but in the noise of the storm Andreika could not make out his words. He only saw how Grandad threw off his cap and heavy boots, crossed himself, stretched out his hands and dived overboard; the lightened boat with a wind-filled sail raced on faster.

All round foam was carried over the sea like snow in the steppe during a blizzard, the shore came to meet the boat, all objects on land becoming clearer; the rain-washed clay of the gullies, the blackening remains of the boats, the little white house and the old willow-tree beside it.

Andreika was filled with joy at the thought that he was saved.

Squeezing the tiller tight under his arm and twisting the end of the rope round his hand, he turned to look round; far, far away amidst the waves and foam a black head bobbed up and down. At times it disappeared and then reappeared, rising and falling together with the waves. Andreika's conception of Grandad was closely linked up with a conception of rude strength that nothing could stand up against, and now the sight of that head bobbing up and down helplessly with the waves astounded him. Andreika screamed out with his piercing, babyish voice:

"Granda-a-d, Granda-a-a-d!. . ."

Swallowing the salt tears that welled out of his eyes and the salt spray that beat into his face, he lay on the tiller with all his strength. The boat shuddered, heeled over and turned sharply round in its path, described a circle and seemed to pause and think as it stood against the wind. The sail dropped and began violently flapping and waving. Andreika, still sobbing fervently, pushed the tiller right over; the boat turned again and the wind filled the sail from the other quarter, bellying it out to the full extent; it raced forward, shipping more and more

water over the gunwale and settling deeper into the water, speeding out to sea away from the shore towards that place whence came the menacing waves, noisily racing and tumbling over each other, the place where the black head appeared helplessly and then disappeared only to appear again. . . .

"Granda-a-a-d. . . . Grand-a-a-d."

1903

Dead March

I

SCARLET BANNERS, their every fold dyed with the heart's blood of those who fought for them, waved heavily over the black, serried ranks swarming through the centre of the big city.

They marched between rows of tall houses decorated with stucco ornament, statues, mosaic and paintings, houses whose shining plate-glass windows gazed down on them with cold indifference. The city was vibrant with its normal, unchanging life. Between those stone piles, between the rows of people, worried but indifferent, hurrying along the pavements, over the endless ranks of marchers, roared a thousand-voiced echo:

"... working people!..."

Both proud and alien were these words.

Proudly they swept over the interminable black ranks whose end was lost somewhere in the turns of the streets.

Alien was their sound amongst those stone buildings, amidst the luxury of plate-glass windows.

Amongst the marchers were young men with happy, beardless faces.

And there were elderly men, too, wrapped in grim concentration, in their hearts probably still struggling against their habits of slavery, against a vague fear of new impressions that were the very reversal of all they were accustomed to.

On they marched in their black, peaked caps, top boots, jackets and blackened overcoats. With the dense crowd came a babel of voices, jokes and witticisms, here and there drowned in bursts of merry laughter.

"Comrades, keep your dressing."

"That's Vanka in a hurry."

"No, it's his fat belly sticking out in front, even the strike couldn't thin him down. . . ."

"Got in a reserve. . . ."

. . . . . .

"Ye-e-s . . . we go in and the adjutant comes up; what do you want? Workers' deputation and so on. We waited. The General comes out. Well, we take off our caps. . . ."

"You ought to have taken off your pants, too. . . ."

"He'd have been more amicable. . . ."

"He'd have let you kiss his foot. . . ."

The speaker stopped in anger and confusion and good-natured ironical laughter swept down the ranks.

Happy and care-free the crowd marched on as though those clean, wide, straight streets flanked by houses with ornamental façades were intended especially for

them, for these casual guests, for these serried black ranks of people demonstrating the strength they felt within themselves.

Rank after rank they came, banners flying, and over them floated the words:

No golden idol's help for us...

growing in volume until their vibrant tones filled the streets and squares, occupied the whole city, for a moment smothering its restless, noisy life, growing into something of great strength, a strength that was not expressed by the naive clumsiness of its poetic form but by the aroused feelings of a profoundly disturbed sea that had come to recognize itself as human. There was proud strength in the rumble of marching steps that filled the city, the strength of self-recognition.

II

"Comrades!"

Lifted up high above the sea of black heads he could be seen from afar and his voice came clear and distinct. The front ranks halted, the rear ranks drew closer, the crowd grew denser as the flowing stream of humanity came to a halt in the same way as raging waters are stilled when their path is stemmed.

The sound of footsteps died down and resounded dully only from the more distant streets.

"Comrades!... I cannot even see as far as your ranks stretch. But..." he raised his hand and his voice grew stronger, "our strength is not in our numbers. We are marching unarmed, with empty hands on which there is nothing but calluses. In the face of physical strength we are as weak as a new-born babe. A dozen armed men can drown the streets in our blood. Why, then, do our enemies gaze at us in infuriated awe?"

He stopped. A dead silence fell. He cast his eyes over the motionless black sea and listened to the sounds of those still marching in the distance.

"It is not our hands that our enemies fear, they fear our hearts, they fear our awakening, they fear our great hearts and their insatiable thirst for liberty! Our consciousness has opened up like a yawning chasm. We have come to realize the depth of our slavery, we have recognized those who have enslaved us. We are gathered together on one side of the chasm and they, the enslavers, on the other, and we know there can be no reconciliation. They also know this, for them, too, there can be no reconciliation. That is why our enemies fear us."

He spoke of the eternal struggle of the enslaved against the enslavers, spoke of the implacable course of history that would inevitably crush the head of that serpent—the power of man over man; he spoke of things they had heard a thousand times, which they knew by heart, could have said themselves, but still they listened hungrily to his words, listened to that which they had so often heard, for the words had not yet lost the chaste beauty of novelty. As love is to youth so that which is old to mankind is eternally new to man.

Once more that black stream of humanity flows on between the motionless piles of the houses, the flags form bright, crimson patches, voices, song and laughter mingle with the sound of marching feet and over all float the words:

No golden idol's help for us...

The ranks still came on and on from the more remote streets.

A street lost in the distant haze turned a vague grey colour, like the greyness of some gloomy sandbank in an empty sea, a flat, gloomy, unpopulated sandbank

over which a white seagull hovers. The people all raised their heads, their nostrils distended and wrinkles formed between their brows.

III

"A-a-h!. . ."
"Where?. . ."
"Over there. . . ."
"Who are they?"
"Can't you see?. . ."
"Them . . . them!. . ."

Like sounds of a night alarm, all talk ceased and a still undefined feeling of uneasiness was passed on from one to another.

The grey sandbank swelled and that which had been sad and gloomy became menacing. Then it became clear—there were people there, grey and all alike. The sun was playing on their bayonets.

They possessed one face, immobile and dumb, like the stone face of a boulder amidst moss-grown rocks piled up by the ages. Dull eyes stared vaguely at the oncoming throng.

The marchers came on in close formation, holding hands; above the blackness of the endless ranks the blood-red banners waved and the whole city was filled with the thunder of marching feet, stubborn, irresistible.

IV

An officer turned half round towards the soldiers and gave an order.

A bugler raised his bugle, blew his moustache aside, placed the instrument to his lips and puffed out his cheeks. In that one motion the whole enormity, the whole significance of those painfully gleaming bayonets

and black yawning machine-guns was concentrated in one man in a grey greatcoat.

He seemed to feel the great power, the horror that was concentrated in him, as he hurled three brief notes at those thousands of lives.

The bayonets wavered, flashing simultaneously, and hundreds of them dropped to lie obediently in hundreds of hands, their points directed at the advancing, living sea, the black muzzles of the rifles gazing silently at them. The first rank of men in grey dropped on to one knee and the machine-guns looked hungrily at the implacably advancing living bodies.

Talk and laughter ceased. The resonant silence was gradually filled by the sound of marching feet. Soon the rumble of marching feet drowned the dead silence filling the streets and squares, hovered over all and dominated the silent city.

The strain was broken as young and old voices, resounding over that crowd of thousands of doomed people, joined in singing the workers' *Dead March*:

Victims we fell in the battle...

The singing rose like a valedictory message towards the pale heavens, towards the blood-red sun, to that city of stone that stood by with bated breath, and the crowds of people in the side streets and thronging the pavements doffed their hats to the singing marchers.

...hearts filled with love for our fellow men...

Like a funeral knell the sounds rolled over the crowd:

...we give up our all for the men who toil...

Their faces pale, their eyes gleaming, they marched on like doomed men.

A pink, smoky haze spread over the sun, tinting houses and the faces of the people, the smell of blood came

in a wave and there was a well-known, sickly taste on everybody's tongue.

The distance between the advancing funeral procession and the men in grey, that awe-inspiring space of death, was gradually reducing, like a life fading away.

... in letters of fire writes the hand on the wall...

Thousands of people were marching, thousands of voices were singing that *Dead March*, the triumphant song of death, while the black shadows of the banners flashed like symbols of mourning through the streets and on the white walls of the buildings.

V

The officer with a moustache carefully combed upwards, measured the fatally decreasing distance with an accustomed eye; then his sword flashed in the sun as he raised his hand and his lips moved, uttering the executive words of command.

The terrible seconds of waiting were filled with:

... farewell, brothers!...

And at that very moment the space of death disappeared drowned by the living, moving ranks. Bayonets dropped obediently to the ground like spilled water and the soldiers, confused and laughing merrily, were drowned in that human stream; their faces were pale and each of them had his own specific look of youth. The grey barrier disappeared in the endless, moving, black ranks in the same way as a granite boulder, rolling down from a flinty coast, disappears into the oncoming waves.

Lowering his useless, cold sword, the officer turned away. The machine-guns standing there looked foolish.

Tens of thousands of people marched on singing the

hymn of death and a bright, young and joyful life arose powerful and triumphant out of the cold of the tomb and out of the funeral knell—life that glistened in the sun, played on the faces of thousands of people while those densely packed along the pavements continuously shouted frenzied greetings to the marchers.

The bloody haze gathered and dispersed. The sickening taste disappeared and with it the acrid, irritating smell.

The sun shone brightly and the city's thousands of suppressed sounds again came to life.

1906

Rebellion in Presnya

I

"BOO-OO-OOM!..."

That dull, heavy thud that set the window-panes rattling came from afar, from the central streets of the city.

"It's started...."

Whatever you were doing, wherever you were going, no matter with whom you were talking, the same words cropped up: "It's already started...." Children's laughter could be heard in the house, a door slammed, somebody coughed loudly, but the sound of the now silent gun still predominated gloomily in one's memory.... "It's started!..." A painful premonition of some great misfortune or some great good fortune filled your

breast, made the heart miss a beat, and would not leave you.

"Oh, my goodness!..." The cook, a peasant woman from Ryazan, poked her head in the door, bobbed up and down and slapped her thighs as she spoke. "You should see the people ... packed everywhere! All Tverskaya Street is black with them, lying on top of each other like cockroaches.... The guns are firing from the Strastnoi Monastery."

I went out. Between the gunshots there were intervals of wearying silence. People passed up and down the pavement as usual. The snow crunched underfoot.

The watch-tower of the fire station was clearly outlined against the frosty sky. I wanted to fill my lungs as full as possible with that wonderful, invigorating air that pinched the ears and cheeks and not think of those dull thuds that came from *there*, but the watch-tower against the frosty sky said: "It's started...."

Everything went on as usual, only as you passed groups of people you heard somebody say:

"*It* fell alongside, and how it scattered...."

And then the shops had a dismal look about them, all tightly shuttered or boarded up. The farther I went, however, the more people I began to meet and I listened to their hurried, disjointed conversation. People stood for a moment, a group formed immediately, they spoke hurriedly, nervously, like people who had been acquainted for many years although they had never seen each other before.

An elderly lady, apparently a German, held her trembling hands to her breast and the feathers on her hat trembled as she spoke.

"I said: 'Let's go, I'm afraid....' And he said: 'Don't be afraid....' And we look ... boo-oo-m.... And he's got no head, and blood is coming from his neck... blood from his neck like a fountain...."

She stood there, her face distorted, twisting a button on the overcoat of the nearest by-stander.... The by-standers listened with surly mien, they didn't want to believe the woman's story but the dull thuds of gunfire convinced them of its truth.

Then I came to the barricades. People were lifting heavy gates off their hinges, pulling down iron fencing and telegraph poles. Red flags fluttered on strings stretched across the streets. Narrow gangways had been left on the pavements. Everybody obediently stooped low to crawl under the wire stretched across these gaps.

The artillery volleys sounded more clearly, with every round the earth trembled. People were no longer walking but running from *there* with faces pale and distraught, faces that somehow seemed crushed.

"Where the hell are you going?" a little old man shouted at me, adding a couple of unprintable epithets. "Asking for trouble, are you? There are machine-guns there...."

"A-a-h, let 'em amuse themselves," shouted a young fellow in the same angry tones, shaking his fist in *that* direction, "let 'em amuse themselves ... let 'em ..." and he hurried after me.

Tverskaya Street stretched to right and left like the line of fate. There was nobody there, but behind the corners stood groups of curious onlookers, women, children, street-traders. They stretched their necks to look round the corners and drew them back again.

I checked my pace. Ahead of me, right at the corner, there was a deafening explosion. In smoke and fire pieces of something black flew into the air, spreading out fanwise. Coming towards me were people, running for all they were worth. Ahead of them ran a huge red-bearded man, his teeth and his fists clenched, a crimson line running from his forehead down his nose and cheek

and disappearing in his thick red beard. A little girl of about twelve was screaming in an inhuman voice:

"Ai, Mamma, ai, ai...."

That cry hung in the air for a long time before it was lost somewhere at the end of the street.

"Ai, Mamma, ai, ai...."

An old woman ran along showing the whites of her big eyes.

"Praised be Thy name, oh Lord God of Hosts, fill the earth and the heavens...."

Shrapnel had hit sixteen of the crowd of curious onlookers. Some of the wounded ran off, others were carried away while four bodies lay motionless in the snow. A fifth stood still in a posture of amazement, then slowly toppled over, without bending, and fell face downwards in the snow, where he lay as motionless as the others. Beside them was a funnel-shaped shell hole. Around the hole there were patches of blood and fragments of something black, either clothing or human limbs.

There was nobody to be seen. I wanted to look round the corner. Something drew me towards that corner, tormentingly and fearfully, like one is drawn to gaze into a yawning chasm.

With my heart in my mouth I took a step forward.

"Wait a minute...."

I turned round. The young fellow who had shouted "Let 'em amuse themselves," came out of a nearby gateway.

"Wait a bit, there'll be another right now."

At that moment there was another deafening explosion from the opposite corner. Smoke and fire poured upwards in diverging streams, plaster rained down from the adjacent houses and glass flew out of all the windows.

"Now let's go."

I felt the back of my head chill as I looked round the corner. Tverskaya Street stretched away in both directions, deserted and deathlike. Far, far away, in the frosty distance toy soldiers were fussing around little toy guns.

"Come away."

I went a couple of houses farther on.

"Who are they shooting at?"

"Just for fun."

I glanced at the revolver-holster that showed under his unbuttoned overcoat.

"You're in the Militia?"

"Yes."

"Why so . . . few?"

"There are very few of us but look how many guns they've brought out."

"And they're killing onlookers?"

"Because the people don't know anything, poke their noses where they're not needed. . . . You have to know how to go out and how to hide, but they walk into trouble. A whole crowd of them have been hit today but not a man in our detachment has been wounded as yet."

I went back. Artillery fire, sometimes in volleys, sometimes from single guns, filled the air.

Twilight was falling. On the square the reddish flames of fires waved from side to side: the crowd was burning down the gates of those houses whose owners had barred them. An order issued by the Governor General announcing a fine of three thousand rubles if gates were not kept barred showed up white on the walls.

The night grew dark and impenetrable. Not a single street-lamp, not a light. The artillery fire died down. It was replaced, however, by rifle fire, here and there single shots but in places long volleys. Who was shooting and where, it was impossible to say. In that impenetrable darkness these short, snappy cracks had a painful and

menacing sound. Unaimed rifle bullets carried over a distance of several versts and wounded people who had no connection with the fighting.

The snow crunched under my feet. Not a soul was to be seen.

II

It was usually quiet in the morning but by one o'clock the artillery opened up again. The streets seemed dead. But in every gateway and every doorway and at every street crossing there were groups of people. They were all talking about cases of brutality on the part of the police and the troops, about the bravery of the Workers' Militia and were eagerly discussing the chances of the two sides in the bloody drama that was being played out.

"They're building barricades in our street," said a servant girl in a scared but at the same time jubilant voice.

"Where?"

"Down at the city gates."

Something extraordinary and astounding is always connected with the conception of revolution or rebellion. When I got to the city gates, however, I found everything unusually simple. With songs, jokes and laughter, people were pulling down telegraph poles, dragging gates, planks, beams and sledges filled with snow, and the barricades grew up in a few minutes in a tangle of telegraph and telephone wires. There were crowds of people on the pavements and in the gateways of the houses.

"Say, boys, the women have come out on the barricades.... Now Dubasov's* goose is cooked.... Ha, ha, ha...."

The joke was taken up and everybody laughed.

* Dubasov, F. V.—Governor-General of Moscow.—*Ed.*

One after another barricades appeared at the ends of the streets in the direction of Presnya* Bridge. Suddenly the onlookers disappeared. The street, white with snow, looked dead, deserted and ominous. Beams, planks, posts, overturned sledges lying motionless across the street in disorder lent an appearance of silent, tense anticipation to the houses and windows, closely shuttered shops and empty gateways.

I also turned the corner into a side street.

"What's the matter?"

"Cossacks."

The short word lit up the empty street and piled-up beams with an even, unwinking grey light, which made one feel: "For whom is this the last sight?" The onlookers squeezed into the gateways. A young man lifted up his hand and shouted:

"Number one!..."

Several men with revolvers in their hands grouped together in the doorway nearest the street corner.

"You all go away, go away, please.... When they come you'll only start running and create a panic," said the young fellow, addressing the onlookers.

"He's from the Workers' Militia," the people whispered to each other as they drew away; in that whisper and in their glances there was respect mixed with fear and the hope of something great from the Militia.

I looked down the street. A grey line of dismounted Cossacks was advancing down the street in open order. As they reached the bridge the whole line burst into a single flash of fire that resounded r-r-r-r ... r-r-r-r, like somebody tearing a gigantic piece of dry, starched calico. Like cracking nuts the bullets showered on the barricades, clanged on the gutterspouts and fell especially

* Presnya—a district in Moscow which saw the major part of the fighting during the 1905 revolution.—*Ed.*

thick in the gateways of the houses.... R-r-r-r... r-r-r-r.... I ran into a doorway in the side street. About twenty passers-by and idle onlookers were crowded together there. Some woman was excitedly pushing her way here and there:

"Oh Lord, where can I...."

The calico continued tearing. In intervals between the rifle fire we heard the crackle of Browning automatics. On the opposite side of the street one of the Militia dropped calmly on to one knee, took aim with his rifle and fired—suddenly shouts and cheerful laughter broke out amongst the Militia.

"Bravo... bravo...."

The sound of tearing calico ceased. The people again went out into the street. I went with them. Everywhere there were groups of people. The Cossacks had picked up four of their number who were wounded and were retiring in platoon formation, a grey mass in the distance.

Once more the work went on furiously. Barricades rose up one after another. At the end of the street, near the bridge, the last of them was built. A red flag waved victoriously over it. And in the distance the watch-tower of Presnya fire-station looked down in grim silence at the flag.

III

At night the city was dead. The snow lay vaguely white. The houses became indistinct black piles lost in the dense blackness of night. Not a light, not a sound. Occasionally dogs barked, calling to each other, and again silence. It was like a big village at night, wrapped in repose and peaceful sleep.

Half past ten at night....

R-r-r-r... r-r-r-r... r-r-r-r....

Volley after volley disturbed the nocturnal quiet destroying the illusion. R-r-r-r....

That was just outside, in the yard of our house. I opened the window with great caution. They were firing into the gateway. Bullets rattled on the fence and on the street door. The whole house seemed dead. There were none of the Militia there since there was no cover for them and no place to move—the yard was a cul-de-sac with only one exit and they could easily have been caught there. Nevertheless the troops fired into the yard, into the windows of the house in order to inspire fear so that people would not show themselves, but mostly because there was no Militia to fire at—the Militia proved too elusive.

The firing died down. The sound of voices came from the street. Gradually a red glow spread over the sky. Showers of sparks flew up, burning wood split and crackled—they were firing the barricades.

Somebody blew his nose loudly and that peaceful sound carried pacifyingly through the cold night air, and one got a picture of some young soldier wiping his fingers on the skirts of his greatcoat, the weather-beaten, kindly but somewhat stupid face of a peasant torn away from his plot of land where he would now be only too glad to be.

The red glow grew brighter. The houses made a dull picture in that bloody glow with their dead unseeing eyes. Then the fire died down somewhat, all became quiet, the soldiers went away—and again dismal, dead and silent gloom prevailed; and the dogs still barked.

"The end!"

I felt as though a tombstone were crushing me. I could imagine the bloody retribution that was to follow. To my astonishment I discovered the next morning that this had not been the end; newly erected barricades had

a proud look about them and the red flag still waved undaunted. All over the city the uprising had been suppressed, but Presnya, deserted and barricaded, sullen and proud, stood up for the last fight.

I had to return from the city and I approached Presnya from the side of the Humped Bridge. From there I had to go along Great Presnya Street. I was halted.

"Don't go that way."

"Why?"

"They're shooting from the fire tower... you'll get shot."

I looked towards the tower. There I saw a number of human figures and occasionally the sound of a shot came from there. Police and soldiery, furious at their inability to take Presnya, were firing at anybody amongst the inhabitants. It was enough for anyone to show himself to be shot down. Bullets flew all the way along the main street, into the yards and windows of the houses.

Great Presnya Street was deserted in both directions but in all the side streets, where there was cover from the fire tower, there were many people. It was impossible to sit at home in those days. I listened to the conversation.

"Last night a student was arrested on the Humped Bridge, he was searched and had a revolver; then a girl and a worker were picked up. The officer didn't ask them anything, didn't know who they were, what they were doing, just nodded his head and ... well...."

"What?"

"Shot them."

There was a sudden and tense silence.

"How can I get through now?"

"I'll show you the way."

A boy of about ten, a bright-looking, agile youngster, looked at me with his clear eyes.

"You can?"

"Certainly."

He led me to the corner from which a barricade stretched across the street.

"Lie on your belly."

"What?"

"Crawl flat on your belly, if you don't they'll get you."

There was nothing to do about it. We crawled on our bellies across the cold snow, taking cover from the fire tower behind the barricade. On the other side, in another side street, we stood up and brushed the snow off ourselves. I gave the boy a tip and he wriggled happily back like a lizard, and there waited for another chance to show somebody the way until such times as the police on the fire tower sent a bullet into him.

"To Moscow River!. . ."

"To Moscow River!. . ."

These words were like a nightmare fixed in my brain, they never left me, day or night, at work and in my sleep. They walked along, the three of them, probably they didn't know each other, walked along in silence. They were surrounded on three sides by men from Ryazan, Kaluga and other gubernias with rifles on their shoulders.

They also walked in silence.

There was no need for supplication, tears or resistance, they were useless. In the frosty gloom the houses on either side dropped back from them, black, silent, dead. Most likely inside the houses people were sleeping or walking about, talking, dining, undressing, or children were crying, and those three walked past houses that were black and dead from the outside.

Then came fences and waste lots. After that nothing but frosty gloom and the white snow underfoot. They halted. Placed the three in a convenient place. For a second there was a terrific silence. And those three and

the peasants from Ryazan and other gubernias were thinking. What about?

Then....

When the soldiers went away they left three black patches on the dimly white snow.

IV

I was awakened by heavy, shattering blows. It was still dark. I got up. The children slept on. The nurse was doing something in the next room. The artillery cannonade increased in volume and the house shook. In the intervals between volleys I could hear the machine-guns and bursts of rifle fire. Strange scraping sounds, like iron being dragged over iron, came from the darkness outside the window, and these sounds gave me a feeling of uneasiness.

Suddenly—crash! With a single, brief sound, a bullet crashed through the double window-panes and sank into the plaster of the opposite wall. Scraps of plaster pattered on the floor.

"Oi, oi, oi... they've killed me.... Oi, oi," screamed the nurse, running from side to side in the room.

I guessed from her voice that she was not hurt.

"Nanny, sit down, sit down! Don't get up higher than the window-sill, sit on the floor," I shouted, trying to make myself heard above the roar of the cannonade.

I crawled across the floor, dressed myself sitting on the floor, and—I have to admit it—crawled on my hands and knees to the children *à la Rousseau.* The two boys were sleeping quietly, suspecting nothing. I dragged them both out of bed and took them into another room where the windows did not look out in the direction of the firing.

The younger boy began crying desperately, but the elder said in a frightened voice:

"Papa, put me down, I'll go myself. . . ."

"Never mind," I said, crawling towards the door, "only don't lift your heads up."

"Is it dangerous?"

"No, no, only don't lift your head."

In the far room the servants and the landlord and his family were all gathered. We lay down pressed close to chairs and sofas.

It turned out that we could not stand up here, either: rifle bullets drilled holes through the double windows, penetrated the inner walls of the apartment and sank into the bricks of the opposite outside wall to some three or four inches. All the time we could hear the soft "chock, chock" of bullets and falling plaster that soon spread in a thin layer over the whole floor.

It began to grow light. The time passed with agonizing slowness. The women, their faces buried in the sofa, were crying. The children sat in silence watching the unusual scene with wide-open eyes.

"Let's go and see what's happening," said the landlord; his face was pale and his lips trembled.

Bending low we went to my room and pressing into a corner looked slantwise through the window. It was growing light. From our fifth-storey window we had a good view of the street and Presnya Bridge, from where the firing came.

"Why, they're firing on the houses!" shouted the landlord, white as a sheet.

Every time a long stream of fire came from the muzzle of one of the guns a ball of smoke burst in one of the houses, shell splinters were splattered, falling bricks left gaping, black holes in the walls and the blown-out windows stared ominously with their dead eyes.

Then came the roar of an explosion under our floor. A thick cloud of greenish smoke was carried by the wind past our window and for a second hid everything from

us. Below us, a shell had fallen in the fourth-floor apartment.

Like a madman I seized my two boys and dashed down the corridor, all precaution momentarily forgotten. My landlord with his wife, children and servant dashed after me. Bullets were all the time pinging into the plaster. We had to run down the huge staircase that connected the five floors of the house. The windows that lit up the stairs were full of bullet holes. The huge flashes of fire from the guns on the bridge caught our eyes. Trembling, half-dressed people were leaving their apartments and running downstairs. Men, women, children and old people were all jumbled up together in that human stream.

The boys clung to me, their arms wound tightly round my neck, and at every moment I expected that those baby hands would loosen their grip and the tiny bodies would hang lifeless in my arms. I raced madly down the stairs not worrying to feel for the steps, raced past the fearful-looking silent windows. The bottom landing seemed to be lost miles below. My legs shook under me and my temples throbbed fiercely.

At last I reached the yard and breathed with relief: the yard was protected by buildings and fences. But we had to fly from here, too—bullets whistled all round, churning up the snow, digging into the earth and the heap of coal against the fence. Those on the fire tower were shooting at the populace.

With the boys in my arms I ran into the basement of a house.

It was dark and damp and smelled of mice. I could faintly discern the silhouettes of people sitting, standing and walking about. The sounds of the firing could be heard only dully. I was overcome by a feeling of weariness such as I had never before experienced, my arms and legs seemed ready to fall off. I sat down on a box in order to gather my thoughts together.

"Nanny-y," whined the younger boy.

"Sh-sh-sh," whispered a frightened woman, running and covering the child's mouth with her hand.

The people all spoke in whispers and walked on tiptoe as people do when there is death in the house and as though they thought this might save them from something.

And where, indeed, was the old woman? Had she been killed or had she run into the basement of another house?

Amongst the whispers came the sound of a prayer:

"Oh, Lord, why dost thou punish us?"

Somebody was praying in the corner in the same smothered whisper, fragments of the prayer reached me.

"Oh, just God... God Almighty... in Thy hands... deliver us, have mercy upon us...from hunger, disease and invasion...."

"If they destroy the upper storeys they'll fall and crush us...."

Somebody stood up and began to feel the vaulted ceiling with his hands.

"It's strong."

"There are iron girders, they'll hold up five houses."

"They'd hold if people had built them, but contractors...."

"They didn't know you'd hide here or they'd have built stronger...."

In another part of the basement was the huge furnace that supplied the central heating system. Wavering red streaks, reflected through the bars of the grate, lay on the earthen floor. People came up to the furnace and held out their hands to warm them.

The black and morose-looking stoker sitting on a heap of coal merged with the darkness. He was from Tula, had been wandering homeless and out of work, and the house superintendent had taken him in out of pity. He helped

with the furnace and in return got a place to sleep and his food.

"Are you scared, Ivan?"

"All the same to me," came the reply out of the darkness.

"And if you get killed?"

"What can I do about it?"

After a short silence he added:

"They've been killing us a long time, there's nothing new in it."

"How, killing you?"

"Yes, killing me. Besides me and my wife there were eight kids in my family. Now there are two."

"Where are the others?"

"Dead. They died from hunger... famine region...."

Again silence in that dark room. The red reflections from the fire trembled on the floor and white-hot cinders jumped out of the grate. Imperceptibly the people all returned to the other room. I remembered how I had run down the staircase hugging my children to me. And this man had also hugged his children tightly until one after another their tiny hands had dropped from his neck and their exhausted, hunger-racked bodies had hung helplessly in his arms....

I went out, ran across the bullet-swept yard and upstairs to my apartment to get warm clothes for the children—it was damp in the basement.

The plaster crunched underfoot in the empty rooms; keeping close to the wall I looked down through the window.

Over there, where an hour before there had beeen big apartment houses full of women and children, full of toil, worry and life, a sea of fire was raging.

In the blinding, incandescent light streaming from the windows, elusively phantom flames were jumping and leaping madly; bloody, pointed heads darted up and

down; bright costumes flashed here and there, appearing and disappearing. There was so much that was licentious, elusive and serpentine in that scene that it was with horror that I occasionally discerned living beings. Swiftly, with mad joy, the mysterious, incomprehensible game went on and the licentious, wild dance continued.

From time to time yawning black gaps appeared in that incandescent atmosphere and through them loomed fire-blackened beams, while white-hot sparks darted sinuously across them.

But that joy and that movement were moribund.

The fire raged on, devouring a whole row of houses. The houses on the other side were also on fire. Beyond Middle Presnya a colossal column of smoke arose. Houses caught fire in many places at the same time. Simultaneously from all the doors and windows smoke poured out curling and wreathing and spreading far and wide. Dozens of tongues of flame licked the walls and roofs from all sides. The fires roared and crackled, smoke and showers of sparks rose above them. Beyond Presnya Bridge there was a single sea of fire. Roofs collapsed but the blackened chimney stacks still stood amidst the smoke and flames like the ghosts of destruction.

It was something colossal, something indescribable, something unnatural. It was the destruction of a city.

I stood fascinated, gazing at that scene of destruction when a sharp, clicking sound made me shudder: a bullet had passed through the window, broken the glass and splintered the woodwork, had penetrated two doors and landed in the wall of the next apartment. I looked down for the last time and could not tear myself away. There were people running around the burning buildings.

They came running from somewhere, their hands raised in an attitude of prayer, they ran up to the burning houses, dived in head first, their legs occasionally visible through the smoke.

A few seconds passed with painful slowness. Black smoke curled silently out of the windows. Then suddenly there appeared a scorched head and the whole smoke-blackened figure of a man. He ran off a few paces and with a practised blow of the palm of his hand on the bottom, knocked the cork out of a bottle of vodka, threw back his head and with a trembling hand hastily poured the merrily gurgling vodka, blood-red in the light of the fire, into his mouth. The State Wine Store was on fire.

And all round him whistled bullets, the fire raged, walls crumbled and fell, roofs collapsed.

V

Back in the basement the same oppressive whispering was still going on. The nurse had found her way there and was telling the children a fairy-tale.

"And the grey wolf said to Prince Charming: Prince Charming, sit on my back and I will carry you through field and forest, over mountains and through thickets, across the seas and rivers. . . ."

With wide-open eyes the children stared at the old nurse's wrinkled face.

"Nanny, why are you crying?"

"Oh God, shall we ever get out of here?" in a whisper full of tears and despair, said a sick woman lying still on a bed.

"Don't worry, dear . . . it's bad for you to excite yourself," said her brother, bending over the head of the bed.

"Excitement is bad," she laughed bitterly.

The guns had been moved and the sound of the firing was now farther away from us.

"And the grey wolf tossed his brush and was off at a gallop. . . ."

"What brush?" asked a small voice.

"Sh-sh. That's the wolf's tail."

Nobody had eaten anything. The children were given cold tea.

"This can't go on. We've got to get out of here."

"Then go and find out something."

"Where can I go? They're shooting.... You go...."

"I would go but there are the children.... What would they do if I.... You know...."

"I'd go myself but I've a mother in Tula, I'm the only bread-winner...."

"Send the porter. Yakov!"

"What can I do?"

"Go and find out whether we can get out of here."

Everybody turned simultaneously to the porter.

"It's impossible here...."

"We can't sit here until they shoot us or burn us...."

"The devil knows what's happening.... You have to do something, what are you standing there for?"

The porter went out.

"I can tell you this," came in a level, dull voice, "I can tell you this: the fire will reach us...."

"Oh, stop it, will you. I can't stand when people begin...."

"What fire?... Which way is it travelling? A dozen miles away...."

"Thank God our house is big enough, made of bricks and stands alone...."

"You're always...."

They hated him. After a short silence he continued in the same dull, level voice:

"Stands alone!... There are fences that join it to the others. And as you know there's a big heap of coal against the fence.... If that catches fire, the doors, window frames and floors will catch fire, too. And you with your bricks.... Then you won't be able to get out, there's only one door and that leads past the coal dump and if we

crawl out of the window into the side street, they'll shoot us at sight, you know that. . . ."

Everybody knew that what he said was true, but still they hated him for it and turned away and stopped talking.

A man in a peaked cap and white apron came into the basement.

"Who are you?"

"The assistant from the general store."

"That's the shop that's burning?... Bomb set it on fire?"

"Bomb!..." answered the shop assistant, angrily. "A bomb wouldn't have set it on fire. Not one of the houses caught fire from the bomb. After the firing, when the district had been cleared of the Militia, the soldiers came. We were glad—it was all over, we thought. Then an officer came in and said: 'Get out of the house, all of you.' We opened our mouths at that. 'Get out at once. We're going to fire the house.' We started asking him not to. 'We've got no time to wait, get out at once.' The shopkeeper begged them on his knees—all they allowed him to take away was four boxes of goods. The soldiers poured kerosene over everything and set fire to it in five places. And so many people in that house, and all of them have got things."

Something blind, cold and clammy crept in, gradually filling the basement.... It was just as though some gigantic wet monster had dropped down on his heavy belly and was staring senselessly at us with unseeing eyes, gazing at us with frenzied cruelty.

"And now they've fired the house on the corner, next to you; they could see that the wind was blowing the other way and so they set fire to it to get the whole row. . . ."

"A-h-h!"

All the voices had suddenly turned hoarse.

"Gentlemen... just a minute... we must cover the win-

dow.... The Governor-General.... And quieter, for God's sake, keep quiet...."

They covered the windows, began to walk about on tiptoe and again spoke in whispers. It was quite dark but on the ceiling there was a patch of light reflected through the top of the window from the burning buildings. That blood-coloured strip of light on the ceiling grew brighter, then died down again and the people all watched it with bated breath.

"Where's the porter got to?... My God, where's that porter?" asked somebody in an hysterical whisper.

"Yakov, where have you been? Why don't you find out when we can get out of here?"

"Yeh, find out.... You go and find out. I put my nose outside and a soldier let fly at me. I said to him: 'Let me explain' and he came at me with his bayonet, split the corner off the gate."

Quiet, compliant, easy-going Yakov now spoke with an air of independence: he was no longer the porter, he was the equal of all those in the basement for he ran the same risk of being burned to death or shot.

It was impossible to know whether it was night or day: probably it was night and the patch of light on the ceiling burned more and more bloodily.

"I want a bucket of water!..." resonant and cheeky, like a spark breaking into the darkness, strain and torpor, the clear voice of a boy rang out through the oppressive silence and morbid whispering.

"Sh-sh.... Quiet!..." people hissed at him, jumping up and waving their arms. "For God's sake keep quiet!..."

A youngster of about eleven, with red cheeks and a round face, all his white teeth showing in a merry grin, placed his bucket under the tap and the foaming water filled that dismal room with sound.

People gathered round him.

"Where did you come from?"

"From across the way, from the white house. . . ."

"Then you can go out into the street?"

"With the greatest of pleasure, wherever you like."

The oppressive weight was immediately lifted, the monster disappeared. Everybody started to talk at once, noisily, hurriedly and in great relief.

"There you are, I told you: they're not beasts. Why should they set fire to houses and shoot sick people, women and children ... people who have nothing whatever to do with it all. . . ."

"Glory be to God. . . . Glory be to our King and Creator. . ." the sick woman had raised herself on to one elbow and was feverishly crossing herself, her eyes raised to the ceiling.

Sobs of joy could be heard.

"Get your clothes on, children."

"Ivan Ivanovich, where did you put my galoshes?"

"So they're not shooting any more?"

"Of course they're shooting!" answered the boy laughingly, turning off the tap; in an instant a painful, crushing silence fell. "They've just shot two. They're shooting down the street, down the alley and from the Zoo."

"Then how did you?. . ."

"The boss says: 'I want tea. . . . Run,' he says, 'Vanka, fetch a bucket of water. . . .' We've got no water in our house and the water carriers are afraid to come out. . . . And the boss and his missus are sitting in the cellar, guzzling elderberry wine. . ." and the boy laughed infectiously, took his bucket and was gone in a flash.

Again the oppressive silence, again the whispers, again the corpse in the house.

Children played amongst the rubbish in the basement, quarrelled, cried and laughed, and the grown-ups stopped them, and kept hissing at them.

VI

"The fire's spreading," said a dull, level, calm voice.

"How d'you know?!" somebody snapped at him in tones of anger and hatred.

"Look!"

The people all raised their eyes to the bloody patch on the ceiling. It was very bright. Then it gradually got duller and duller. Dozens of inflamed, burning eyes peered at it.

"See, it's dying down."

"Oh, God, is it really?"

"Children ... my darlings ... my babies ... we're saved...."

Everybody stood up and all of them, even the children, gazed at that patch on the ceiling.

"Smoke is hiding the flames," said that same dismal, dull, calm voice.

"Stop it! Stop that raven croaking...."

The patch on the ceiling again grew brighter, the bloody streak of light looked down indifferently, like a death sentence.

The heads dropped. Monstrously absurd ideas came to mind. At times it seemed like a bad dream from which one wanted to awaken. I looked at the floor to hide a criminal thought: they would all be burned up and I would remain safe and sound with the children.

Swiftly and furtively I made a mental survey of the yard, looked in the shed and over the fence seeking a tiny hole through which it would be possible to crawl. Should I take the children and crawl on my belly through the Zoological Gardens—no, the shooting was fiercer there, today they shot a keeper who went to feed the animals. On the other side the fire is raging. Bullets are whistling down the street.... There's no way out....

My chest felt cramped and I breathed with difficulty.

I raised my head and met the gaze of infuriated, blazing eyes and realized that the same idea was in all of them: everybody would be burnt but they alone would be saved.

"Hum-m-m, smells of smoke...."

Although they hated him and his dull voice, they did not raise any objections: everyone felt the bitter smoke tickling his throat and eating into his eyes. Actually there was no smoke, so far the wind was carrying it away in the opposite direction, but everybody felt it.

The bloody patch blazed up brightly. There was the dull sound of a shot: who was it this time? And those who had been bayoneted? Stabbed first in the heart, then a second and a third time, quietly and without any fuss.

"What an endless night."

"What's the time?"

"Must be about three."

"My God, another four hours' torment!..."

I took out my watch, looked at it, rubbed my eyes and looked again.

"*Eight o'clock!*"

"Impossible.... It can't be.... Your watch has stopped."

Watches came out of many pockets.

"Eight...."

"Five to eight...."

"Ten past eight...." From all sides came the stifled voices as a dozen watches were held to a dozen ears.

After that everybody sat silent and immobile, like statues. The children were sleeping in various places and various poses.

Nobody spoke but the basement was filled with strange whispering sounds, with rustling and a restless, disturbing crackling. The raging fire spoke in a language of its own and its hissing, the crackle of wood, the sounds of falling brickwork found their way insidiously

everywhere—muffled and suppressed by heavy vaults and thick walls they filled the inky darkness with a murmur of sorrow and despair.

I could hear somebody sniffing, suppressing her sobs. Louder and louder. At last it burst out unrestrained, filling the whole basement and suppressing the rustling and whispering. A young woman had fallen on to her knees and was sobbing loudly, her face buried in her hands.

"Why, why this deception?! Love, happiness.... If it is only to see your children perish before your eyes, I don't want it, I don't want happiness.... I don't want deception.... I don't want it!..."

The sobbing racked her whole body. Nobody spoke. Nobody could find words of consolation for her. Everybody was so painfully sorry for himself. The bloody patch on the ceiling gleamed menacingly.

And time stood still, the night stood still, thoughts also stood still, only that same narrow circle of sensations wearily crushed one's spirit.

VII

"They've come!... They've come!!" a hysterical voice shouted madly.

Everybody jumped up, their faces distorted with fear, prepared for the worst.

"Who? Soldiers? Artillery? Shooting us?"

"They've come.... They've come...."

"But who? Who? Tell us who?..."

People seized her by the shoulders and shook her angrily while she continued to writhe in spasms of hysteria.

"They ... the firemen...."

"Are they putting out the fire?"

"No, they're pulling down the fences between our house and the next.... They don't want to burn us...."

The whole basement was filled with a common hysteria. The women crawled on their knees to the corner where they supposed the icons to be, crossed themselves, laughed loudly, embraced each other and kissed their children. The children woke up in fright and screamed at the top of their voices. I ran into the stokehold.

The fire was almost out. Ivan was dozing in a corner, indifferent to everything. The people were gradually calming down. People, with smiling, joyful faces, began to talk loudly and to shake hands with each other. They were all sorry for each other, they were all fond of each other. The night would pass quickly. It was already ten o'clock. Half past ten....

I wanted to sleep and felt how good it would be to sleep soundly, but there was no place left to lie down, all the places were occupied. Gradually the children quietened down.... The red patch on the ceiling grew paler but nobody paid any attention to it any more.

"Do you know what," said that dull voice, "I'd get out of here while the going's good; at least I'd take advantage of the peaceful situation to get the women and children out.... It would be better...."

But people forgave him, they loved even him, now.

"But why?" they asked him softly, and in their gentle words could be heard the reproach: "What can one expect from you? You are not normal." "If measures have been taken to prevent the fire reaching our house, then the fact that the house contains innocent people has been recognized."

I was overcome by fatigue. I rested my elbows on my knees, buried my face in my hands and dozed. At times I wanted to laugh out loud, so senseless and ridiculous was our position.

Then I began to see disconnected and tangled visions; I struggled against sleep and dreams, opened my

eyes with a tremendous effort but my heavy eyelids again imperceptibly closed. Everything seemed red to me and against that sickening crimson background hairy human faces were reflected, accompanied by the whisper of the raging conflagration, and the soldiers did everything in their power to plunge their bayonets into me, the bayonets bent as they struck my body and the soldiers quickly straightened them out and again plunged them into my body while I shouted to them: "Hurry ... hurry!..."

Somebody was shouting in my ear: "Hurry ... hurry..." and shaking me by the shoulder. I opened my eyes: the ceiling was red, in the reddish semi-darkness heads, arms and legs were lying about in disorder as though they had been torn off; again I closed my eyes. Again I was shaken. This time I stood up.

The porter stood beside me, alarm on his face.

"Soldiers.... A terrible number of them.... They looked into the window of the gatehouse.... They say they're going to open fire on the house...."

The arms, legs and heads lying about in disorder began to move and people with sleepy, scared faces stood up.

"What?"

"Who says so?"

"Where from?"

It is already two o'clock and I thought that I was still asleep.

"My God, what a long night of torment!..."

"It can't be true. Why should they shoot at us. They've pulled the fence down."

"What d'you mean, 'why'? Why have they been firing the whole day long?"

"We ought to send somebody."

All eyes turned to the owner of the calm, dull voice. He got up and went out. He returned a minute later.

"They're not soldiers out there but beasts. I thought they were going to bayonet me."

"Insist that they take you to an officer."

He went out again. We waited. Twenty minutes passed—half an hour.... The wearisome waiting gradually changed to uneasiness. Every minute somebody pulled out his watch.

"He's not back yet."

We listened to the slightest sound, but we could not hear any footsteps. One and the same awful thought entered everybody's head: "They've killed him."

"They've killed him," a voice whispered in my ear, "only don't say it aloud."

"Don't say it aloud," everybody whispered to everybody else.

Everybody sitting there in the bloody half-light is doing his best to make sure that the others could not read that terrible thought in his eyes. More than anything else they feared the horror, the panic, that would arise the moment that awful word was pronounced.

Footsteps. For a second everybody listened tensely. Perhaps the soldiers were coming. It was *he*.

We rushed to him.

"Well?..."

"Did you tell them?"

"Will they fire?"

He answered in that same calm, level, dull voice.

"They led me out of the yard. All the time their bayonets were pointed at me. The side street is brightly lit up by the fire, not a soul anywhere.... 'Where are you taking me?' 'Go on.' I began to think they'd stab me somewhere under the fence. One more or one less.... Aren't there dead bodies enough lying in the Moscow streets?... They led me on to the main street. It was as light as day. An officer stood there. I couldn't see his face, there wasn't any face, only a moustache, a huge,

well-groomed moustache upturned towards his eyebrows. I told him—children, women, sick. He stood with his back to me. Then said disdainfully through his clenched teeth: 'If you cover the windows, if nobody approaches them, if nobody comes out of the house ... *if there is not a single shot from the house or the yard we shall not open fire....*'"

Again there is a corpse in the house. The people went back to their places. Everywhere faces drawn with the strain. The reflection of the fire played on the ceiling, casting a quivering light but in those strained, wide-open eyes there was nothing but the deepest gloom. The conflagration muttered and crackled: as before there was the same suppressed, fussy and excited whispering, but in ears strained tensely to listen there was a gravelike silence: one thing they expected, one thing they listened to intently—the fatal shot that would come from there beyond the wall.

I looked sorrowfully at the children and searched for a place where I could put them if they began firing into the window. There wasn't a single safe place: the street was on the level of the windows so that the whole room was under fire. It would have been better to go back to the upper storeys of the house but to appear in the doorway meant death. Again I wanted to laugh aloud. I did not look at my watch but leaned back against the wall and slept a deep, black dreamless sleep.

"He's sitting there, round the corner, where the fence joins our house ... it's easy for *him* there, can't be seen...."

That ominous whisper reached my ears and sunk into my brain like white-hot needles. Cunningly evil eyes were looking at me from under cunningly raised brows in a bare, wrinkled face distorted by a cunning, bad-tempered grin.

"He's only waiting to torment us.... He gets amuse-

ment looking at our faces, at the torment of anticipation....”

“But why should he....”

“He-he-he.... What do you mean, why? He’s all black and charred.... Everything burnt up: tables, beds, clothes, children, wife.... And he can’t look indifferently at our children ... he’s hidden there ... and....”

Maliciously gleaming pupils under slanting, raised eyebrows peered straight into my eyes and almost touching me was that bare, wrinkled, distorted face.

“And he’ll *shoot* twice into the air....”

I shook off the clawlike bony fingers that were fumbling at my shoulder.

“And day will come and all will end, and all will be as it was, but the madness will remain....”

. . . . . .

Never in my life had I awaited the joy of new-born day with such horror as on that occasion. I jumped up and began hastily dressing the children.

“Can we go out now?” I asked with sinking heart, listening to odd rifle shots.

“Of course you can’t be sure...” said the porter. “Hold up your hands and run.... They seem to be starting again....”

I seized the two boys by the hand and ran out of the basement. The sight of the charred remains of the fire and the destruction was appalling.

The sharp frost took my breath away. The smaller boy yawned like a fish out of water; panting and with staring eyes he trotted along as fast as he could beside me, his little legs working rapidly.

“Papa,” said the elder boy, also trotting along by my side, “will they shoot at us?”

“No, no.... Only hurry up, children.... Hurry, hurry ... please....”

A random bullet flopped into the fence. I expected a volley at any moment. The snow crunched irritatingly.

"Quicker, quicker ... as far as the corner ... quicker!..."

There remained only fifteen ... ten ... five paces.... We reached the corner.... We turned it.... We were saved!...

Moscow
8-18th December, 1905

Under the Cliff

I

THE BLUE TWILIGHT fell over the distant river bend, over the yellow sands, over the high cliff of the riverbank and over the already silent forest on the far side.

Sounds grew duller, colours faded and the face of the tired earth was gently covered by the soft blanket of repose under a deep blue sky, in which an occasional silver star had begun to appear.

The already vague outlines of the barge and the rowing boat beside it formed a black and indistinct patch against the high bank. At the very edge of the water the dancing red flames of a fire cast their reflection all

round, the scum from something boiling in a pot hanging over the fire hissed as it fell on to the hot coals, long shadows crawled and wavered back and forth, seeking something on the narrow strip of sand on the riverbank, while the high cliff rose pensively above them, faintly displaying its red clay.

The night was quiet but its silence was filled with the babble of running water—ceaseless whisperings, hurried and troubled, at times cheeky and bantering, at times sleepy and dreamy—but the river was calm, its bright surface unruffled.

The splash of fish jumping, the cry of a night bird, the rustle of falling sand or the scarcely perceptible sound of a steamer's paddle wheels—or maybe it was just imagination—and again that dreamy, hardly audible whispering, at first sleepy and fading away, then rousing itself and hurrying, while the river gleaming under the gathering darkness of the oncoming night continued its way in perfect peace.

"Sounds like the *Yermak* coming."

"Can't be! She's probably stuck somewhere on the Dog Sands. . . ."

Those clear and simple words, that sudden human speech resounded and died away in that incomprehensibly uneasy whispering of the quiet, serene river.

A stunted shadow, half-hidden near the flickering fire, suddenly straightened up and ran away from the fire; the shadow bent clumsily over the cliff top and disappeared into the darkness of the steppe whence came the cries of the quail and the scent of new-mown hay. Above the fire rose a tall man, big-built, with long arms and legs, in a coarse cotton shirt; with a spoon he skimmed the scum from the water bubbling in the pot and threw a handful of millet into it. The water immediately ceased bubbling and the shadow returned from its excursion into the steppe and hid itself again by the fire. The tall

man sat motionless, his arms clasping his knees, gazing at the bright river, at the forest disappearing into the hazy distance and at the far bank.

Some little distance away a black human figure, motionless and to all appearances dead, lay stretched out on the sand.

The face was not visible.

It was impossible to say whether he was sleeping or thinking, whether he was ill or whether he had already ceased to breathe.

Darkness had spread over the forest, the river bend and the distant sandy bank. Only the water, now a sort of glossy black, was still gleaming, and the multitude of bright stars reflected in it made it seem bottomless.

It seemed that everything was as it should be, that on that blue night a fire should be burning under the cliff beside the dreamily babbling water, that the red flickering flames should imperfectly light up the tall, awkward figure of a man sitting there like a statue, his strong arms embracing his knees, the second dark, motionless figure lying on the sand and the third, an elderly man with a huge beard and a calm and stern face, cast from bronze.

It seemed as though someone were singing pensively and without words although no voice could be heard; it was apparently all imaginary—the river hidden in the blue dusk, the fire, the dim outlines of the cliff and the slightly flickering stars in the dark depths.

"The time has come. Human life springs up like grass. . . ."

The voice was calm, even and slow, and so great was the serenity of the whole scene that it could not be said to whom the voice belonged.

Amidst the ceaseless, undying, dreamy whispering it seemed that the voice belonged as much to the blue night as did the grimly rearing cliff, the babble of the water and the fire with its shadow fleeting silently over the sand.

"... like grass springing out of the black earth in early spring...."

"Huh-huh.... It's come springing out and nothing you can do can stop it."

Vaguely and unclearly that "huh-huh" echoed faintly along the distant bank.

The man who sat hugging his knees fell silent. Silent also was he whose silhouette was dimly perceptible on the sand. Silent also was the old man with the reddish-bronze, mobile face who sat idly throwing back with his bare hands red hot coals that jumped out of the fire, and in that silence one felt an unfinished thought—the blue night itself was thinking.

A piercing, agonizing cry carried across the river.

Again silence, pensive and gloomy, again the unbroken, restlessly hurrying, rustling whisper of running water. The cliff, dimly outlined in the darkness approaching from all sides, stood silent and behind it the steppe lay silent as well. The pot on the fire boiled lazily, the scum on the water heaving sleepily.

The piercing cry was repeated over the river opposite them. The water sprite was playing. Or perhaps some unseen bird was flying low down over the water—it was impossible to tell. The night pressed close from all sides, dark and silent.

"You can hear a long way along the river. Even if it was as far as the Crooked Bend, you could hear it."

Both of them bent their heads, their ears strained to catch a faint, indefinite sound. They hoped to catch the approaching sound of a steamer's paddlewheels but the night noises, soft and vague, heard a thousand times over but nevertheless strange and specific, told only of the absence of man.

The fire burned on and beside the fire sat two men; the third lay, a motionless black shadow, on the sand.

II

The tall man got up and took the pot off the fire. The shadows darted about and one of them again climbed up the cliff and was lost in the steppe.

"It's ready."

He put the pot down and twisted it so that the bottom sat deep in the sand.

"It must be about nine.... Oho-o-o...."

"Tell that chap to come and sit with us, he looks hungry enough."

The old man took a spoon out of his pocket and rubbed it with a gnarled forefinger.

"Hi, boy! Come and eat with us, if you want to," the tall man leaned over the black, motionless figure.

"Eh? Eh? Eh?... Where to?... Stop.... Hold on, boys!..." shouted the third man, jumping up, trembling.

"What's the matter with you? I said you can eat with us...."

The young man cast an astonished glance round, unable to comprehend that darkness, the dimly seen outlines, the silence of the night filled with the ceaseless whispering babble, the flickering, reddish light reflected in the water; he passed his hand over his face as though removing a cobweb. He seemed to go all soft and smiled a helpless, tormented smile.

"See, I've been having bad dreams again...."

The light of the fire showed an astoundingly emaciated, tormented face, restless, brightly burning eyes staring out of big black rings somewhere into space.

They sat around the pot, legs pressed up under them on the sand and began to eat, blowing loudly on the porridge. Shadows, repeating their movements, flitted strangely across the sand.

For a long time they ate in silence, the sound of mas-

ticating human jaws breaking rudely into the dreamily whispering sounds of the night.

The first pangs of hunger were appeased: the young man, whose face bore the earthy stamp of death, sighed loudly.

"Uh-huh.... That's a bit better...."

And again smiling his helpless, tormented smile, he added:

"I hadn't eaten for two days."

"Where are you from?"

"From the town." Again that tired but now trustful smile. "I escaped from the very jaws of hell. How I got out, I don't know."

"That's what we thought when you were still walking along the riverbank," laughed the tall man, "but we didn't trouble to ask. There's no need to bother a man unnecessarily."

"Don't be afraid of anything.... The patrols are roaming the steppe and picking up those who managed to get out of the town. If they grab somebody they give him short shift—a bullet or the rope. We've helped many of them across the river.... The crowd on the barge and the steamer crew are all our people. They never think to look into our barge, if they did they'd make a haul. What did you do in the town?"

"Printer," again he hunched his shoulders as though he were cold and looked fearfully round.

The tall man took a spoonful of porridge, blew on it and, pouting his lips, sucked the porridge in noisily together with a mouthful of air.

The water sprite or the night bird again made itself heard on the river. A fish jumped with a splash but in the darkness the expanding rings could not be seen. The old man ate silently.

"I kept to the river and whenever I saw anything, I dived into the water.... All day yesterday, until it was

dark, I sat in the water: I dug myself into the mud, my head hidden in the rushes and there I sat."

He put down his spoon and sat all hunched up; thoughts, far from that warm night, far from the burning fire, filled his head and dimmed his eyes.

"I can't bear to think of what happened. Blood.... Blood.... And so many killed!..."

Again he looked round fearfully and hunched his shoulders as though he were cold.

"I'm tired.... Tired and in pain ... not so much my arms and legs, it's my heart that hurts. Everything in me has given way, sort of hanging...."

Again he cast that look round, looking somewhere past the darkness, past the fire, past those who sat there —it was just as if the ghosts of ruin and destruction hid everything else and there was nowhere to go.

"The worst thing is," he burst out suddenly, "so much work has been lost! It's no easy matter to rouse up our people and knock some sense into their heads.... You hammer away at them, teach and teach and they still go their own way, like an old nag they obey the whip; they're dying of hunger and guzzle vodka.... Before we could get some sense out of them, organize them into circles, teach them to read and to think, before we could get them to understand something, oh, what a long time it took, and the work we had to do! And how many people we lost in prisons, chain gangs and exiles, yes, and what people!... Brick by brick we built it up and then... cra-a-ash! Finished. All over...."

Again he turned to look round, seeing nothing, to look past the blue of the night, past the whispering sounds, past the peaceful calm that breathed from the sleepy riverbank.

"Ah-h-h-h..." he groaned, swaying rhythmically over the fire, pressing his head between his two hands as though he were afraid it would burst and fly into splin-

ters. And his shadow swayed with him, a distorted, crooked shadow that also held its head in its hands, a distended and ugly head.

Avoiding the wreckage, the ruined hopes and despair, the babbling stream continued its perpetual dreamy whisper of something that concerned it alone, and the starry sky trembled very slightly in the humid darkness. Some twigs thrown on to the fire did not catch fire and a scarcely visible wisp of smoke crawled up into the air straight and unwavering.

That peace and silence, sunk deep into the darkness of night, were majestically filled with something else, something profound, as yet undiscovered, as yet unsaid.

"You see, boy, it's night, peace, everything is asleep, everything is resting," and the old man's voice itself expressed a profound calm. "Everything, the beasts, and man, and reptiles, and the grass, why, even the grass lies down at night and in the morning straightens up again to its full height. Everything is calm and peaceful ... ye-e-e-es...."

A faint, fluttering sound came from over the river, probably some snipe flying home for the night.

"Yes, rest.... Because they're all exhausted after the day, all worn out, shoulders, hands and paws have all been working.... And all the world sleeps. And in the morning every one of them will go his own way again, the beasts and birds and man. As soon as the sun peeps out, they're ready to start all over again. That's how it is, boy...."

For a long time there was silence. The printer, sitting hunched up, stared at the smoky path across the heavens. The tall man was finishing off his porridge.

"Grandad," a hoarse voice said painfully, "in the morning everything will wake up, but those lying there in the town, they won't get up."

"You eat, boy, eat," said the old man, wiping his beard and moustache with the palm of his hand. "Uh-uh . . . a muzhik, a farmer went out to plough. He ploughed and ploughed, took a basket of seed and began to sow. He sowed, harrowed, the rain came and brought forth green shoots, simply drove them out of the earth. And the farmer was glad. What more does a farmer want—he's ploughed, sowed, gathered the harvest and his belly's full. Uh-uh. . . . Ears began to form on the corn. And then, suddenly, out of nowhere a black cloud appeared. A storm, hailstones and in a moment everything was beaten down, where there had been corn the earth was black again. The poor farmer was in despair. . . . But what d'you think he did? Gave up? Dropped everything? Oh, no, the kids still wanted to eat. . . . Went to the railway and got a job, earned money. But a train cut his legs off. He lay sick for a long time and then gave up the ghost. . . . D'you think that's the end? No, listen, boy. The fields weren't left to run wild, his brothers and brothers-in-law began to plough and sow. Again the green shoots sprang up, again the ears formed. No matter how much the muzhik has been tormented—they drive him to war, they let him rot in prison, they crush him with poverty, he bloats and dies from starvation—but every spring the green shoots come up. . . ."

He stopped.

There was expectation in the silence which followed.

"Ah?"

And somebody answered from across the river, painstakingly, half questioning, half confirming: "ah-h-h. . . ." The printer began to ladle porridge from the pot.

"A star's falling, see," said the tall man.

"That's how it is, boy. However much you trample the grass it always springs up again, always striving upwards. We were watching you a little while ago, you were staggering along looking left and right and you

thought there were enemies all round you. You came to us and you were afraid of us. But we'd already decided what sort of a fellow you were and I said to Mityukha: 'Don't touch him, let him go round us.' And now it seems.... Over there we've got...." The old man nodded towards the barge. "Go where you like, we unload at every village. Let the people get to know about you, let the grass straighten its back again.... Oho-ho-ho."

And from beyond the river: Oho-ho-ho.

III

"What are you standing there for, eh?"

"The barges can't get across the shallows, see? They're sitting tight, the river's running low very early this year. The steamer took part of the cargo and went on through the shallows. It'll come back and take some of the cargo from this barge and then tow it away."

The printer lazily scraped the remains of the porridge from the pot. Then, quite suddenly, he looked up with a gentle smile and glanced all round. For the first time he noticed the silent, pensively calm night, the stars flickering in the depths and the dreamy whispering of the invisible running water. He sighed deeply and said:

"What a night!"

A pleasant tiredness, calling for sleep and rest, came over him.

"It wouldn't do me any harm to sleep a bit, I haven't closed my eyes for two nights."

"Wait a bit, there's a pot of curds still left."

The tall man got up lazily and, together with his shadow, went over to the boat, raked around in it, returned with a bowl in his hands, and sat down. The shadow also returned to its place.

"Here, drink this up. It's good stuff."

The unceasing babble of running water that was forgotten as it mingled with the surrounding silence was suddenly interrupted by the invasion of an unasked and unwanted sound from outside. It was vague, diffused, indefinite, but it grew and became clearer, filling the night with something that had not been there before.

The three men turned their heads towards the cliff and listened.

The fire, its reflection flickering and swaying, looked restlessly with its red eyes at the cliff which appeared momentarily out of the darkness. Shadows darted swiftly and fearfully about the sands, looking for something and not finding it, stretched out with an effort, looked at each other and over the cliff into the steppe. From the steppe came regular sounds of hoofs that grew ever nearer.

Nearer, nearer.... The listeners could feel that up there, on high, the earth was dry, hard and resonant.

The fire had exhausted its last strength and, guessing what was going on, began to die down, fell asleep and covered itself with a blanket of white ash, and the disappointed shadows spread until they mingled with the surrounding darkness, but their heads were still pointed in the direction of the cliff.

The trampling ceased. Over the edge of the cliff, where it was cut off clean by the starry sky, appeared the dark, distorted silhouette of a monster. It rose up motionless, broad and irregular in shape, like a mass of rock fallen from a mountain, and hid the brightly scintillating stars.

For a few seconds there was a silence that swallowed up all the sounds of the night.

"Hi! Who are you down there?"

The voice broke away from the cliff, hoarse and gruff, and was repeated unwillingly from across the river.

"What's that to do with you?" the tall man threw at him lazily and carelessly, ladling out the curds with a spoon.

"Who are you? You. . . ." And there followed a stream of profanity that desecrated the strained silence of the night.

The tall man got up awkwardly, like a bear.

"What d'you want? Get out of here. . . . You're up to something wrong."

The fire glanced out cautiously from under a half-closed red eyelid and for a moment the red glow showed a horse's head over the cliff and above it the head of a man and beside it another horse's head and above it the head of another man. At that very moment a long stream of fire flashed out, the sound of a shot came after it, its reverberating echo was carried indignantly across the river and the forest, breaking the silence of the night, for a long time sounding and re-sounding and then dying grimly away.

Gone were the calm night, the dark river with its flickering stars, the dreamy whispering, the cliff, the steppe whence came the cries of the quails and the honeyed scent of new-mown hay. They were replaced by something hard and cruel in its senselessness.

"Cossacks!" whispered the printer, standing up. "Good-bye, I'll run for it. . ."

The old man took him by the arm and held him back.

"Wait a bit . . . there's no hurry. . . ."

"Don't try to frighten us, we're not easily scared. This way some innocent man may get hurt, three or four versts beyond the forest. You know how far a bullet travels. . . . Bastards!" The tall man shook his fist heavily and angrily.

White ash again covered the fire and the dark silhouettes above the black cliff moved, grew smaller and shorter and disappeared beyond the edge.

The stars continued their play undisturbed and from the steppe came the sound of hoofbeats retreating and dying away in the distance, leaving behind an intan-

gible flavour of menace and misgiving in the silent darkness. The hurrying, racing whisper of the water tried in vain to refill the silence and darkness with sleep and all-embracing forgetfulness, but the silence, left by the retreating tramp of horses' hoofs, full of evil menace, was stronger than the dreamily whispering calm of the night.

They sat down again.

"They don't let you eat, the swine!"

"A rotten crowd! They've got all the land they want, more than enough, still they can't leave people alone."

Although it was quiet, the night could not settle down again and the serenity and dreamy sleep that had lain over all seemed to have been blown away. There remained only the darkness and a restless feeling of indefinite expectation. In the darkness the sudden rattle of some metallic object confirmed this tense waiting. A minute later the sound was repeated. The heads turned again but this time they peered attentively into the darkness of the low riverbank.

Again the rattle and with it the sounds of the sand on the moist riverbank crunching under a hurried, measured tread. In the darkness of the riverbank under the cliff there appeared something black, blacker even than the darkness. Closer, closer.... Now the dark silhouettes of the nodding heads of horses and their riders came into view.

Seated firmly in their saddles, the muzzles of their rifles gleaming over their shoulders, they rode straight up to the fire, reining in horses that were tossing their heads and snorting warily.

"Who are you?"

"What's that got to do with you?"

The three of them stood up.

There followed a stream of choice profanity.

"D'you want to feel our swords? You can, if you like. We'll cut you in two!... Who are you, I want to know?"

"Are you blind, or what? Watchmen from the barge."

"Ryabov, tie 'em up and drive 'em to the commander."

A young Cossack with a grey face and protruding jaw jumped from his horse and holding it by the bridle went over to them, his accoutrements rattling as he walked.

"We know what sort of watchmen you are. Turn round."

"And you, you long bastard, you'll get the whip all the way. I'll teach you to answer back, you. . . ."

"It's easy to tie us up and drive us away," said the old man, calmly, "that's your job in life, only there'll probably be some trouble afterwards. You take us away and the barge is loaded to the gunwales, by morning it'll be empty. When the steamer comes the barge'll be as empty as my pockets, eh? I suppose the people'll say the Cossacks did it, that's what they chased the watchmen away for, they're past masters at it. . . ."

"Stop your lying, you old devil!" In the voice of the bearded Cossack there was a note of uncertainty. "Wait a minute, Ryabov. . . . Where's your passport, bum!"

"Have you just come up, milksop?" laughed the tall man. "The boss usually keeps the passports. Go and ask the captain, he'll show you the passports."

The Cossack pulled at his reins in uncertainty.

"And that one?"

"He's also a watchman, he's our waterboy on the barge."

"None of your lies, you son of a bitch! D'you think I can't see he ran away from the town. A-ha. That's the one we want. . . . Take a look, Ryabov, maybe some of them ran away. Take a look round the fire for footprints, over on that side. . . ."

The young Cossack took a twig, held it in the fire until it caught fire and, bending low, walked off a few steps looking attentively at the sand over which shadows trembled spasmodically.

"No. The footprints are on your side, they come straight from the town."

"You bums thought you could lie to us, did you? Hiding revolutionaries, eh? All right, you'll get what's coming to you!... Tie that one up, Ryabov."

"We haven't got a rope."

"Put a strap round his neck, drag him like a tyke."

The young Cossack took the free end of the long hitching strap hanging from the bridle of his horse which the Cossacks use in place of a headrope and walked over to the printer.

"Turn round, bum."

The printer pushed him away and stepped back.

"You can go to hell!"

A rifle bolt snapped. The printer raised his eyes: the muzzle of the bearded Cossack's rifle stared at him.

"Another step and I'll fire!"

Ryabov threw the strap round his neck and began to tie it. The bearded Cossack slung the rifle over his back. The printer looked with tired and indifferent eyes into the darkness over the river. The night was dark and oppressive, it closed in on them from all sides, there was no air to breathe.

The old man and the tall one glanced at each other meaningly and continued looking calmly at the proceedings.

"Fixed him?... All right, mount and come on. Drive him in front of your horse with the whip."

The young Cossack put one foot in the stirrup and took hold of the front arch of the saddle so as to spring into the saddle and the strap gleamed black between the horse's head and the man's neck.

The old man went up to the young Cossack and at the moment when he was about to throw his leg over the saddle bent down to him and whispered something in

his ear: the youngster fell from the horse and burying his face in the old man's shoulder screamed something in a broken voice.

At the same time the tall man went to the bearded Cossack who was mounted on his horse, held out his hand to him and asked:

"Did you lose this, sir?"

The Cossack turned in his saddle to look at him and felt something like a snake take his neck in an iron grip. He immediately spurred his horse to make the animal carry him out of danger but a second thick snake wound round his waist with just such an iron grip, while a huge hand came from behind his back and seized the reins, tugging at them so hard that the horse threw up its head and sat back on its haunches, slid back and was stopped with its croup against the cliff.

"O-ho-ho! Ba-a-astard!... Rya-a-abov ... h-e-e-lp!..."

"All right, bu-u-ddy."

"Wait till... I... I... get... sword...."

"I'm waiting.... Off you go...."

Heavily, spasmodically and hoarsely, they breathed their burning hot breaths in each other's faces, the horses struggled under the weight of two people and from the cliffside clay and lumps of hard earth showered down on them.

"Hi ... Rya-a-abov!..."

The Cossack mustered all his strength to get his hand free and was fumbling for the hilt of his sword, but the devil that had him in its paws bent him back with superhuman strength and despite the bearded Cossack's also superhuman effort he was forced out of the saddle. Dully gleaming stirrups on straddled legs came uppermost and a head, wet from perspiration, appeared under the belly of the struggling horse.

Something cracked and the earth groaned from the impact of bodies that fell under the rearing horse.

The night stood grim and imperturbable over them, waiting, and the heavy silence was broken only by hoarse breathing and suppressed groans, while curses and profanity were held back by furiously clenched teeth.

The horse felt itself free and, stepping all the time on the loose end of the rein that dragged along the sand and pulled its head down, ran in fear from that place where the black bundle was rolling heavily on the ground.

The old man and the liberated printer bound up the young Cossack who was lying helplessly on the sand.

"Give me the halter strap," grunted the tall man, his knee on the chest of the panting Cossack.

The old man and the printer caught the horse, ran to its master lying on the sand, and the Cossack's joints cracked as the strap bit into the flesh of his wrists.

"Phew, I only just managed to pull that devil off his horse. A bit later and the horse would have taken him away.... Let's finish the curds, they don't give you a chance to finish your supper. Too much trouble with these swine."

IV

They sat in a circle, happy, breathing rapidly, wiping the sweat from their faces, and continued their supper.

"That youngster didn't even groan when Grandad laid him out on the sand."

"And that fat pig was strong enough...."

"Look at him. And he wanted to get you by the neck, did he?... Ugh, fathead."

They threw some twigs on to the fire and the latter, almost asleep, peeped out anew and again the shadows wandered over the sand. The bound Cossacks lay motionless and over them, motionless, stood the horses, their heads bowed.

"Last year we stood there, in the shallows," began the tall man and, laying aside his spoon, he turned and noisily blew his nose, pressing his nostril with a finger, "and a storm broke out, and what a storm! A blue ball flew past and swept me half a dozen yards to one side. That ball struck a tree about a hundred yards from the bank and nothing was left of it but a stump. It's true, I'm telling you."

"Last summer was stormy, two houses caught fire in the town."

The bearded Cossack had begun to recover from his astonishment, from the unexpectedness of what had happened and looked round mistrustingly, squinting to see as much as he could from his awkward position. Yes, it was true, he really lay there tightly bound with a halter strap, the horse was standing over him and those three were calmly eating curds that showed white on their spoons. He could not see Ryabov who lay behind his back.

"What are you thinking of, you drunken bums, don't you value your own heads or are you nuts, or what?"

"We value our heads all right!" laughed the tall man, "that's why we tied you up."

"D'you think there are only two of us? There's a whole Cossack Hundred standing by and patrols are sent out in all directions.... If one comes this way they'll shoot you on sight.... Untie me immediately!"

"Why should they shoot us if there won't be any Cossacks here?"

"Don't talk nonsense, you can't get out of it. Untie us immediately ... you!"

"Why should they shoot us if there won't be any Cossacks here?" continued the tall man, innocently. "You have a little patience. We'll finish our supper, unsaddle your horses, stuff sand in your trousers and shirts and into the river with the pair of you."

There followed a deathlike silence. The Cossack's eyes grew round and even in the darkness the whites showed up plainly. He began to breathe quickly and with difficulty, but, taking himself in hand, said in a dull voice:

"You needn't try to frighten me, I don't scare easy.... You can't lose a Cossack like a needle, it's certain to be found out. You can't drown the horses and they'll give you away."

The tall man chuckled merrily and his chuckle was repeated just as merrily across the river.

"Talk while the talking's good. Don't you worry about us, Cossack. We'll unsaddle the horses, hang the saddles round your necks, just to make sure: they're heavy and won't float, and the horses we'll take out into the steppe, take off their bridles and let them go and just see how they enjoy a free run. In the steppe, Cossacks, they'll soon find a master. They'll get near some farm or other and, you know, anybody will pick up a lost horse with the greatest of pleasure, it'll always come in handy on the farm. If not, there are always horsethieves roaming the steppes and they'll be only too glad to get a horse so easily. That's how it is, Cossack."

Silence. The night over the Cossacks became black and heavy, filled with a presentiment of death and knowing no mercy. Suddenly through the motionless, menacingly silent darkness came hoarse, rising and falling, intermittent howls, like those of a young wolf with his nose pointed at the sky. The bearded Cossack sniffed and squinted to watch the three men spooning their curds. They ate slowly, they did not have to die, and their calm was terrible. The intermittent wolf howls disturbed the night hush, they drifted, frightened, across the river and disappeared as bitter, sob-like howls in the gloom of the motionless expanses of steppe.

"You can't do a thing when you come up against your betters, but you can kill and maim innocent and defence-

less people.... Tied him by the neck like a dog. Not by the hands or the waist, by the neck, ai-ai-ai...."

The bearded Cossack clenched his teeth and muttered through them:

"Stop howling, bastard!..."

But the wolf howls still continued behind his back and drifted over the river and the steppe. All tensed up, the bearded Cossack watched the people calmly eating their supper, with a pain in his heart he wished that the curds would never come to an end, but the spoons went deeper and deeper into the bowl.

"Listen, you fellows," he said dully, "let us go...."

"You see, boy," began the old man, softly, "you came out to kill and maim people and didn't give it a thought, and now you're lying and waiting yourselves."

Licking the spoon with his lips and wiping his moustache, he continued:

"Ye-e-s, the time will come when the people will suddenly rise up, and you will lie and wait, and you'll be wondering, and in your heart you'll be sorry and you'll sing another tune: if only we could turn back, we'd live differently."

"We are only doing our duty, we don't do as we wish ... I have my farm, my family, I, too, want to get back, it's no fun roaming the steppes...."

"Duty!... if it was your duty to smash icons I suppose you'd do that, too?"

"Of course! Because I took the oath to serve throne and my country..." and he imagined he could feel how fast time was flying on that deserted, dark and silently expectant riverbank; already the spoons had reached the very bottom of the bowl.

"Oath!..." the old man's voice sounded bitter, "oath! Listen, here is an oath for you." The old man raised his hand like one inspired. "By the sacred stars, by the

bright moon, by the dark woods, by the pure water, by the beasts of the forest, by the birds of the air, and by mankind, because it is a matter of human life—and not by some hocus-pocus read you by a priest. That is the true oath. That is the oath the great martyrs swore by. That is the oath everybody should take who hasn't got corns on his soul.... But you, your souls are all covered in corns and you poke your noses in where they're not wanted like blind pups.... Life, there it is, all round you," he made a wide gesture with his arm, "you ought to swear an oath to life and not to the priest. But what is that life to you, you tread it under your horses' hoofs, slash it with your swords, run it through with your lances, shoot at it.... See, you fire your rifle and don't know where the bullet will fly to!..."

It was dark and motionless all round them. There was no longer the living water chattering faintly in the darkness, nor the forest beyond that listened dully to it, nor the bank that could not be seen two paces away. But the faces of the three men lit up by the fire in the darkness shone red like copper, and that was all.

The Cossack could not tear his eyes away from them. The more he stared at them the greater appeared their strength. They sat there as though they were cast from bronze, some unknown Titans of the night and darkness.

"Oho-ho, that's how life is!" continued the old man, putting down his spoon and wiping his whiskers which had crept into his mouth; then he took up the spoon and began ladling curds into his hairy, bewhiskered mouth, and the Cossack followed the movement of that spoon with its white contents. "That's how it happened.... For instance, you work on your farm day in and day out. You turn up the earth with your plough.... Then you're worried until the green shoots show and keep looking at the sky and asking for rain. Then the shoots spring up,

form a stalk, the ears grow and fill out and all the time you keep fussing round it, fussing round the wheat, round that grass. . . ."

"A star has fallen," said the tall man, belching.

The Cossack turned his eyes towards the river filled with a host of twinkling stars, he heard the faint babbling of the sleepy water, but it all seemed to hedge away from him like the past in his memory, a past in which there was the family and the farm and the everyday work that had become part of him—all that was in the past—the present was nothing but darkness, and in the darkness the profiles of men gleaming bronze-like in the firelight.

The horse stood there, its ears laid sadly back and its head bowed in sorrow. The thin cry of some unseen night bird carried over the river.

The old man stopped talking and from under his grey, frowning brows looked across the river at the dimly visible forest.

"Grass grows and you take care of it, a twig grows out of the ground and you walk round it so as not to break it. . . . But man, he's nothing, he's cheaper than wheat; just think, he's a living being, and the stars up there, the stars shine the same for everybody, and you come to tyrannize and kill and put people in prisons. . . . Oath!. . . There is no oath greater than human life, that's the dearest of all oaths, boy. You came here thinking you were a great strength, but now you're lying and waiting. . . ."

The Cossack licked his lips and made a superhuman effort to free himself, but the rawhide strap only cut deeper into his flesh.

"Listen, fellows," he began, dropping down helplessly, "if I. . . ."

The faces of the men moved as they ate their supper and the fire lit them up completely showing them so

filled with determination that the Cossack turned his eyes away.

The whole of that day passed through the Cossack's mind, everything was there with astonishing clarity in that fatal sequence of events that had brought him here to his doom, to this senseless death. He listened sadly: behind his back was the howling lamentation of the youngster but from the steppe, not a sound. And who, indeed, was likely to come here? There was no hope of rescue, no hope of mercy, and there could be none since he himself had shown no mercy.

This silence was more awful than death. He listened and listened, painfully tense. Then suddenly he heard the chirping of countless grasshoppers, the chirping that was always there in the steppe but which today sounded like a last farewell.

Apparently they had already started doing something to Ryabov for the howls came faster and more troubled and then suddenly broke off.

The bearded Cossack's heart missed a beat. The tall man was bending over him fiddling with the strap. The strap weakened and fell off his hands. The Cossack jumped to his feet. Ryabov, hopping on one foot, his accoutrements rattling, was climbing into the saddle: at last he sprang up and the horse carried him at a gallop into the darkness.

"Ho, ho, ho!..." laughed the tall man, "he's taken his feet between his teeth. And you, too, clear out."

The Cossack, doing his utmost to control his feelings of joy at regaining his life, outwardly calm, walked over to his horse, tested the girth and then mounted and took up the reins....

"Good-bye, fellows."

"So long, boy!..."

The horse moved off at a slow trot, crunching the wet sand, and the darkness gradually swallowed it up.

The dreamy whispering of streams of water went on as before and the countless stars in the night sky were reflected in the dark water.

"Now you can sleep if you want to."

"What about cleaning the pot?"

Leaning over the water the tall man began energetically scrubbing the inside of the pot with sand.

"They took to their heels pretty fast...."

"Nobody's anxious to die."

"The Bear's high up. Must be getting late, ah-ah-h-h."

And somebody on the river repeated that yawning sound many times over. A silence hung over the steppe, over the river, over the faintly visible distant forest producing a feeling of peace and repose.

"What's your name?"

"Alexei."

"Patronymic?"

"Nikolaich."

"All right, Mikolaich, we'll get into the barge to sleep, we've got some straw there. What about a swim before we go to bed?"

"A sound idea."

They went down to the water's edge, the river was moving very slightly and gleaming like thick oil, a changing line separating it from the motionless, dark bank. They had begun to undress when suddenly their hands stopped motionless at their belts and their heads all turned towards the cliff.

"Eh?"

"Surely not?..." came the short and troubled words.

Their heads nevertheless turned intently towards the steppe whence came the rapidly approaching hoofbeats of a trotting horse. Again they could hear that the earth up there was dry, hard and resonant and for some reason or another this gave them special cause for unrest. Alarm, like an invisible black bird, hovered in the frown-

ing night. It was only the old man who did not pay any attention but continued doing something in the boat.

"Eh-eh-eh!" groaned the tall man in chagrin, "I said we shouldn't let 'em go.... Now we're in for it.... Listen, coming at a gallop so as not to miss us."

"Perhaps we ought to go across the river," said Alexei, a note of sorrow in his voice.

"Don't worry, any of you, it's all right," put in the old man in a calm voice, and continued with what he was doing.

The sounds were now quite close, on the very edge of the cliff: then they grew softer and turned to the left, going towards a path leading downwards. For several minutes there was undisturbed silence, then the approaching sound of hoofs crunching in the sand. Two of them stared steadily in that direction.

"Eh-eh-eh!" repeated the tall man, resentfully, "we shouldn't have let them go...."

The black silhouette of a horse appeared gradually out of the darkness. The bearded Cossack rode up at a trot, reined in his impatient horse and shouted to them:

"Listen, fellows.... Take your barge over to the other side right away and let the printer get away through the woods.... That swine has gone to report to the commander of our Hundred. He wanted to shoot you from up there, from the cliff and I had a hard job talking him out of it. I told him we had to take you alive. I couldn't go too much against him or they would accuse me of hiding revolutionaries.... Look out, in the morning a whole troop will come and you'll get it in the neck...."

"All right, in a couple of hours the steamer will be here and by morning there won't be a trace of us."

"Aha, that's good.... I thought I'd better come back and tell you.... So good-bye!"

"Good luck, Cossack, and thanks."

"And my thanks to you," he held his horse back a bit. "We don't like it, either, but it's the way things are.... And that old man of yours, he's fine!"

The horse trotted off briskly. For some time the sounds of retreating hoofbeats came from the steppe until at last they died away. Over the edge of the cliff the stars shone brightly with nothing to hide them, stars covering the whole sky and reflected in the dark depth of the river. ..

1907

I

He was old, as old as the millhouse whose thatched roof hung lopsided, its old blackened straw flapping in the wind.

Here there was no rush of white foam, no gurgling and roaring of water, nothing but a tiny stream glittering in the flume standing on posts high above the ground, a stream that lazily, with pensive slowness, turned the slimy, old, blackened wheel, catching the sleepily bubbling water in the float-boxes as in a cup as they came down slowly, afraid to lose a single drop of the precious liquid that seeped so scantily from the foot of a sand-hill whose yellow outlines shone through the greenery of the poplars and willows.

He was old; shading his eyes, tear-moist under their red lids, with the palm of his hand, he looked at the quiet, sleepy, sparkling stream, making sure that there was no leakage. The white sand under the flume, with its tender shoots of delicate green grass, was perfectly clean and dry and over it ants bustled about shifting gigantic beams.

The water falling on the mill-wheel resounded faintly through the dreamy stillness, through the foliage of the weeping willows.

Its drowsy tinkle, which never died down day or night, saturated the limpid air, bright with a sleepy smile, filled with the scent of thyme, fragrant grasses and hot dry sand.

Midges hummed as they swarmed in wavering columns in shady places. Sometimes it seemed that even the silence was resonant and that there was resonance in the hot noonday colours, in the whiteness of the petals, in the blue splashes of forget-me-nots, in the dense foliage.

And there were not even doves to disturb that resonant silence, no flock of them to swoop noisily in a flashing grey throng.

Very few people came here to grind their corn. A cart stood there with its shafts pointed up towards the patch of blue sky visible through the tree-tops, an old, wrinkled peasant snoring in the shade it cast. The unharnessed horse swayed back and forth in an effort to overcome its drowsiness while imperturbable flies applied their proboscides to the corners of its half-closed eyes.

The old man was tall, a little round-shouldered, with tufts of hair around a bare, spotted skull and a beard that was white either from flour or from old age.

There was no rumble of millstones in the millhouse, no clatter of the teeth of wooden wheels, but the single stone turned slowly, creaking from old age, and the flour

trickled from it in a scarcely perceptible stream. It trickled and trickled and then stopped to think, while the open box stood there in vain expectation. The white powder settled softly and sleepily and once more, white and trembling, that thin, pitiful stream of flour continued.

One sack a week was the usual thing and it was rarely that anybody visited the mill. And the roads leading to it were bad, tree-stumps stuck up in the way, roots and fallen trees barred the forest road, while in places the windfall piled up to form a barrier.

The old man walked over to the cart, scratched a skull as dry and shiny as everything else in the vicinity and said:

"Sleeping? Well, sleep, then. . . ."

The peasant continued snoring. The horse raised its eyelids causing the flies to move momentarily away, looked up, blinked its kindly, moist eyes and began lazily and sleepily chewing, only to doze off again, swaying back and forth with a wisp of hay hanging from its mouth.

The old man walked up and down.

There was nothing to do in the mill. It seemed that from time immemorial the water had been running of its own accord, the moss-grown wheel had been slowly, quietly and lazily turning of its own accord, the flowers had acquired their colour and aroma, the willows their green leaves and the moving sands their yellow colour all by themselves. On rare occasions the old man would take a sharp-pointed hammer and with light blows would set about roughening the worn millstone.

The old man did not like to leave the mill because between him and the big river stretched a dense forest, overgrown with wild hops, full of fallen trees, gloomy and uninviting.

But Grandad often went out to the other side of the mill where it was light and open, where there were yel-

low sands. He would climb to the top of the sand-hill, sit down, and baring his bald head to the sun would just sit still. A short midday shadow lay at his feet, and before him, as far as the eye could reach, an endless expanse of sand.

There was no wind, the air was still, transparent and clear, but still the sands gave off a scarcely perceptible sound, sad and mournful. Fine, shifting sand, even when there was no wind it gave forth sounds as it trickled down from the crests of the ridges.

The old man looked ahead of him and right to the horizon there was the same hazy yellow reflection. People lived over there, beyond the sands, as though they lived across the sea.

But Grandad remembered the time when there had been a farm about four versts from there with wells and orchards, and woods with glades and silver forest lakes. The farmers had mowed succulent grass in the forest glades and set their trammel in the lakes.

Sitting in the sun the old man grew limp. The hot haze trembled, the torrid horizon flickered like a phantom and melted away.

The old man yawned and made the sign of the cross over his hairy, bewhiskered mouth.

II

One day a ringing voice broke through the soporific tinkling of the water and through a silence that was sleepily doing its best to arouse itself.

The old man always got up early and on that day he was about when the pale pink of dawn had scarcely touched the yellow sands. He went round the mill, sat for a while on the sand-hill, cooked himself some thin gruel on the stove standing under an old willow tree and then stood still, either reminiscing or just warm-

ing himself in the rays of the sun that shone through the foliage of the willows.

It was then that he heard the voice, a woman's melodious voice. The old man, shading his eyes with his hand, turned towards the forest.

A black, twisting road on which the mud had long since dried, wound its way out of the forest, ugly roots stuck up here and there but no human being was in sight.

"Now then, sleepy. . ." came a cheerful, resonant voice from behind the trees.

Wheels creaked and a horse snorted.

Through the bushes a reddish creature and beside it something white were moving. Around the bend appeared the head of a horse nodding up and down under the hoop, followed by shafts and then a cart, swaying and jumping on all four wheels over the tangled roots; behind it, stepping carefully over the hard lumps of dried mud walked a barefooted girl with a whip in her hand.

She was strong-looking, pock-marked, with laughing eyes and her white kerchief had fallen on to her neck.

"Good morning, Grandad."

"And the best to you, sweetheart."

"Will you grind some wheat for us?"

"Of course."

The girl took hold of the corners of the sack but Grandad, suddenly growing important, pushed her to one side.

"What are you doing, you'll hurt yourself."

She heaved the sack on to his back and he, bent double, held it on his shoulders; watching carefully to make sure his trembling legs did not bend under the weight, he set out at a lively pace for the millhouse, followed by the girl's merry ringing laughter.

"Look out, you'll break in half!. . ."

That laugh had burst so strangely and unexpectedly into the resonant silence and repose that it seemed to

have blown away the lazy sleepiness and echoed for a long time in the foliage, under the hanging roof, beyond the willows and among the yellow sands, and the quivering patches of sunlight that formed golden, lacy patterns on the sand also smiled joyfully.

"Where are you from, sweetheart?" said Grandad, tipping out the wheat and returning to the cart.

But she was busy, gaily and adroitly removing the bit from the horse's mouth.

"Where can I water my horse? The chickens have drunk up all the water you've got."

Again clear laughter disturbed the accustomed quiet. She threw the remains of the water out of the bucket. Water dripped from the kindly, soft munching lips of the horse.

The old man's brows twitched.

"Bare legs!"

Again the willows heard the unaccustomed sounds of the girl's ringing voice.

"What d'you think! I just cut my feet to pieces coming through the forest. On twenty-five rubles a year you can't buy much in the way of shoes. I'm from Shevirino, working for Lean Ivan."

"A tough one."

"I'll say he's tough."

"Tight-fisted."

"Starves his farm-hands to death."

"Hunger somehow seems to agree with you," and the old man slapped her jauntily on her strong, straight back.

She, however, jumped into her cart, took up the reins and began turning the horse.

"What's the hurry? Stay on a bit. . . ."

"There'll be trouble, if I do, with those swine. When will it be ready?"

"You don't give me a chance to look at you!... You'd better come before the holiday, the flour will be ready."

But the cart-wheels were already squeaking in the forest and from behind the trees her ringing voice carried back:

"Where are you going, ugly, into a stump again...."

"Grandad, hi, Grandad! Which way round the Dob Brook? I don't want to get stuck in the mud again...."

For a long time the old man walked about in a daze, kept stopping and scratching his head, trying to recall something.

"Eh? How d'you like that?..."

Tinkling water, tinkling noonday colours, the usual tinkling dreamy silence surrounded him, but Grandad heard none of it, the same picture was all the time before his eyes.

He went to his sand-hill, but this time the sands did not give him any pleasure, they lay motionless and exhausted, and the heat beat down in elusively vibrant streams.

It was as though there were somebody who would not let him sleep that night. Grandad came out of the mill-house—it was pitch-dark, the only light coming from the bluish dots of the fire-flies. A bittern boomed in the forest and an owl suddenly cried its plaint, a thin sobbing note like that of a child that is deeply hurt.

"Eh? Well, I never...."

The tinkling voice of the water filled the dark and motionless silence with something fresh, something that had a new meaning, something Grandad could not understand as he stood scratching his bald head.

"Ah? Now just imagine it!..."

He went back indoors and lay down; he fell asleep but again it seemed as if somebody woke him up, somebody restless but gentle, and again he went out.

The same silent darkness still reigned over the sands. But suddenly this silence had become alien to the old man and the motionless, hot, dry darkness was no longer filled with pictures of the past that were at times vague and formless, at others clear and distinct in all their detail—the sleeping farms, the loud, re-echoing songs of the girls, the drunkenness and quarrels of the young men, the exhausting work, the holidays—now there was nothing but silence, emptiness, oppression and as the old man stared with unseeing eyes into the darkness he suddenly realized the gloomy emptiness and silence. He saw and understood the restlessness of anticipation, of the desire that merry shouts and clear, bright laughter should fill the emptiness and silence of his lonely life.

"Temptation, God forgive me!" and he plodded back to the house to lie twisting and turning on the straw until the leaves and branches and the vague, unclear outlines of the hanging roof stood out clearly in the dawn.

III

The girl came back before the holiday.

On a clear day, with the sun shining down through the foliage, the squeaking of wheels and a clear, girlish voice rang through the forest. The sounds broke the forest silence in a strange and rude manner but the old man's brows twitched merrily.

"She's come.... Oh, you...."

"I hardly got here alive, Grandad, that brute sank up to his belly in a bog again...." And as she came round a bend in the road, the roan horse good-naturedly nodding its head, her kerchief made a white patch above the cart. "Have you ground it?"

"Yes, yes. Get down, water your horse and come in for a bit."

The horse drank, pensively dripping clear drops of water. An oriole in the nearby forest sang a tricky fugue, as clear as the notes of a flute.

"All right, I'll unharness him. Let him rest a bit and I'm worn out, too. It's hot."

He glanced at the dark sunburn of her gaunt cheeks and at the dark eyes that seemed bigger on account of the black rings around them.

"You certainly look worn out, sweetheart."

"They're killing me, curse them, I can't go on any more!... I don't get a moment's rest day or night.... If they'd feed me decently.... I'm always hungry.... This week we're haymaking, my arms are ready to fall off. And when I get home from the fields I have to wash for the whole gang of them."

Her voice, however, was as cheerful and jaunty as ever, as though she were talking of something happy and joyful and not of laborious exhausting work.

The old man got out a samovar green with age and lit it. The samovar was lit three or four times a year on the most solemn occasions.

They sat together under the old willow. The pipe of the samovar hummed with a merry, welcoming note. The patches of sunlight flickered ever so slightly. The girl drank her ninth cup of tea, wiping away the perspiration that was pouring down her face, turned her cup upside down and placed a gnawed piece of sugar on top of it. The old man, however, kept on offering her tea, she poured out another cup and again the perspiration poured down her flaming, hot face.

"And so you see, sweetheart, at some mills the dam bursts, or the millhouse gets washed away but here I'm as safe and sound as in the arms of Jesus. The water runs its own way quietly down the flume, spring, sum-

mer and winter, it's all the same, because it's spring water and it doesn't matter if the weather's hot or frosty. The year round, little by little, poor enough but a hundred measures or even a hundred and fifty I can mill, I swear. That gives me food and clothes and shoes."

"Yes, it's really good if the dam can't burst because you ain't got none," she said as she noisily bit off a piece of sugar. "But it's terribly dull here, sand and forest and nothing else, you never see a human being."

"Dull? What makes you think it's dull?"

The old man got excited and raised his grey brows as high as he possibly could.

"How can you be dull if you've got money.... With money, darling, it ain't dull, with money, darling, you can be happy anywhere. And there are always people coming to grind corn, if one doesn't come another does. When they come they tell you all the news, what's doing in the village and even how things are in the town, they tell you everything like you can see it."

"My uncle had a mill on the river, like this here...."

"Dull! No, it's dull when your belly's empty, it's dull when you're hungry.... And I look at you, there's nothing of you, and your feet are all cut...."

"And how! All in blood.... Across the fields, in the forest, through the mud, everywhere I go barefoot."

"That's just how it is when you haven't got a kopek to your name. Eh? D'you earn so very much on the farm?... You'll be a beggar all your life.... Won't you, now?... Who'd want to marry you?"

This was the first time anybody had spoken to her like that. The calm tenderness of the sunny day and the lacy patterns of the shadows that trembled softly on the grass and sands, the submissive meditation and faint sound of the water and Grandad's friendly words, all looked tenderly into her soul.

She sighed, wiped her face expansively and for the last time turned her cup upside down with determination.

"Thank you, Grandad."

Suddenly she burst out laughing.

"Eh-eh, live while you can, don't be shy and when there's no bread you can fast, if your shirt's black turn it inside out and wear it again!... Well, good-bye, Grandad, I must go or they'll curse me. I'll tell 'em the flour wasn't ready and I had to wait."

When she put her foot up to the horse-collar, like a man, to tighten the straps on the shafts, Grandad went up to her and standing beside her with his hand on the hoop started talking to her.

"Ah? Listen to me.... You're a good girl, obedient, won't you marry me?"

Silence. The sound of the water. Two bright, two huge eyes looked at him.

"Think it over," stammered Grandad hurriedly, "just think what you are. Eh? And how long have I got left to live, eh? I can't live as long as you and when I die it'll all be yours, all the mill, I'll make a will and you'll be a lady, a landowner...."

She stared at him with her round eyes and suddenly burst out laughing, loudly and irresistibly.

As long as the wheels could be heard creaking through the forest he could hear somebody roaring with laughter; then the sounds died away altogether. From somewhere far, far away, from behind the trees, from behind the leaves and branches a song drifted towards him. A lonely woman's voice sang, at times faint and mournful, at others jaunty and merry. And when that, too, was lost in the depths of the forest, the water continued its tinkling babble, again there was that pensive, lazy silence, again the soundless musical colours of the flowers and leaves, again the wavering columns of

insects and then the faint, weak, lonely and appealing voice of a woman would come drifting back.

The whole day long Grandad leaned against the wall and scratched his head.

"Ah? Just imagine it. . . ."

IV

Every time she brought him wheat to grind or came back for the flour there was one and the same conversation: "You young fool, you don't know when you're well off . . . the mill's not to be sneezed at, it earns money every day, it feeds me every day and everything's yours. . . . I shan't live much longer, a year, two years and you'll be the mistress: if you let this chance go you'll be sorry for it."

Sometimes she laughed, sometimes she was angry but soon she stopped laughing and listened. Then the time came when she said:

"Have it your way. All right, I'll marry you. . . . Only before we're married you make the will. . . ."

But no sooner was he her husband than she began to wring her hands, clench her teeth and cover her eyes in disgust.

"You're rotten, you smell of the graveyard," she snapped at him, her eyes flashing angrily.

"So what? You married me with your eyes open, didn't you?"

She gave herself up entirely to the house, thoroughly enjoying the novelty of having something of her own, of being able to do as she pleased. She began to keep poultry and bought two pigs. She made terrible scenes with the old man until he rethatched the millhouse. Evade the issue as he would, he was eventually forced to thatch it with fresh straw and the millhouse under its new yellow roof looked quite pretty when the sun shone on it.

The mill suddenly expanded to enormous proportions, the wheel turned softly and the millhouse stood there alone, the blackness of its silhouette covering the forest, the sands and her past life.

When she opened her eyes in the mornings and the voices of thousands of birds vying with each other floated to her from the forest, the first thing she noticed was the new roof gleaming in the sun. And as she fell asleep the last faintly-remembered impression was the slowly turning mill-wheel fading into the darkness.

Everything at the mill was changed.

The dreamily-lazy silence was filled with the fresh, young, busy sounds of the farmyard. The hens clucked, the growing pigs squawked and the young mistress loudly cursed the farmers who had come to grind their corn.

She was completely taken up with the job of setting the whole household in order, afraid to lose a day or even a single minute. And those days filled with cares and worries followed each other in monotonous sameness as slowly and inevitably as the old, slowly turning mill-wheel.

There was sadness in the thinning forest, the leafless trees could be seen for a long way. Everything was moulting, becoming sombre as though some lonely being had come on a miserably dark, drizzling night and wiped away all the bright colours and sounds and since then the cold, uninviting, listening silence had been waiting for something.

The days were short and the mistress of the mill sat all the time at the window knitting stockings for the winter. The dark silhouette of the mill looked dully in at the window.

The stitches flew endlessly from the flashing needles and with them her thoughts flew endlessly and were lost;

softly, like the monotonous gurgling of water, a sad song poured forth, expressing something that was not said in the words.

"Ai, ai, girlie, girlie," sing the lips.

"...and on his little right arm there's a birthmark," dreams the heart, "a birthmark, and his hair is as fair as flax, and the priest names him Vanyushka...."

"...they didn't marry her to her sweetheart..." continue the lips, "...and Vanyushka holds out his little hands to his mother, he takes her round the neck...." comes from the empty heart.

"...not to her sweetheart, to an old, old man...."

"...Mummy, Daddy.... And Mummy laughs, Daddy laughs, Daddy, curly-headed Daddy...."

And there are ringing tears, and her eyes shine happily while on the other side of the wall Grandad is arguing with a farmer.

"I keep telling you, come on Saturday, on Saturday.... If there ain't no water I can't make it, can I?"

Through the window comes sadness and complaint, soft ringing tears, a dream of happiness, of a young, curly-headed husband, of the boy Vanyushka holding out fat little hands, of a tiny daughter with a red ribbon braided into her plaits, and again the song runs on, the hurrying stitches fly from the thin, flashing needles.

In winter, when the forest was covered with silver and the sands sparkled, wolves came and howled endlessly and plaintively. The water gurgled softly under a thin crust of ice. Sometimes snow fell in big, heavy flakes, swirling in the wind that howled under the window and down the chimney. On such days they went early to bed and did not want to think or dream of anything.

With the spring, however, the longing returned, longing for the curly-headed, distant, unknown sweetheart, for Vanyushka and for the little daughter with the red ribbon in her plaits.

V

An old man's sleep is short and light.

He wakes up and listens: his young wife is breathing softly, and soft is the breath of the forest depths. He falls asleep again and again somebody whispers: "Old man, hi, old man. . . ." Again he gets up and goes out: the water is tinkling, the trees are silent and something is rolling over, black and awkward, like a huge ball.

She might go away on the quiet, and if she went she wouldn't come back.

He always looked in fear and suspicion at the farmers who wanted to stay overnight.

"You ought to go home, old man. . . you'll sleep better at home. . . . You see I haven't even got any hay for you. The wolves may come and pull down your horse. We've got no shed to put up a horse. . . ."

On moonlight nights the old man hardly slept at all. Once he woke up and listened and could not hear her breathing. He went out of the house.

White refracted light streamed through the branches, through indefinite bluish patches. The flowers bathing in the moonlight looked like spectres. The foliage had a strange white tinge and the mill was one solid hunch-backed shadow. Flashes of phosphorescence gleamed in the flume and the wheel, in the deepest shadow, turned slowly, morosely, monstrously.

The water was tinkling, tinkling with a spectral, bluish transparent ring. The old man was like a wizard in a magic kingdom.

"Now just imagine it, where can she have got to? Ah?"

The sands, seemingly motionless, were encroaching on the forest in long tongues, shining thin and yellow through the trees. Their very motionlessness hid an irresistible and perpetual motion into the heart of the alert but timidly silent forest.

He looked into all the dark corners, into the storeroom, under the poplars; everywhere the same tangled patches of light and shade, everywhere silent and empty.

He made his way out. The trees grew thinner. The sand was thicker under his feet and before him stretched a vague hazy expanse filled with illusive still life.

In the moonlight the bowed figure of a woman sat on the sand-hill.

The old man stopped and bent his head. A voice sounded in the sensitively vibrant bluish glow, mysteriously distant and nevertheless close at hand.

"On Midsummer's Night the girls cast wreaths on to the water... four years ago I plaited a wreath but it sank.... In Shevirino today there's a fair ... the boys will be there in shoals and the girls will nibble sunflower seeds and nuts.... There'll be laughter, they'll take each other's hands ... and in the evening a show...."

The bluish glow trembled and on the horizon illusive mirages appeared and disappeared.

"...A monkey, too, awfully funny, just like a man. And in the evening dancing in the village... you can hear it a long way off...."

Silence. For a long time or a short, he did not know. Then the silence was broken by an angry, screaming woman's voice.

"When you snuff it, I won't stay a day longer. I'll sell the mill or rent it and then.... Phew!..."

She whistled coarsely like a man and her angry grey eyes glared at him.

His hairy lips moved. He was weak and old. He did not hear or he did not listen to her words and mumbled, the hair around his mouth waggling, and stared with his eyes full of tears at the sands.

"Ye-e-s ... they've covered everything ... and it was so merry when I was young..., Our farm stood over

there behind the sand-hills, and behind the farm, the orchard and behind the orchard the fields.... We used to gather, I remember, by the orchard, and we'd take vodka and biscuits and get the girls together and there'd be dances. And my father had horses that were just wild. We'd harness them up and drive the girls round the farm. And behind those hills there was a lake, a big forest lake it was, clear and bright.... And in the autumn we'd go spearing fish there...."

For a long time he mumbled with his round, hairy mouth.

"We lived well, three hundred sheep, cows, and the women wore silver rubles for necklaces."

And on and on, he mumbled and muttered with his hairy mouth.

The bluish glow trembled, mirages came and went, flocks of sheep wandered past, forest lakes gleamed, rubles jingled on women's necklaces, there were little white cottages and a vision of their roofs against a vague, indistinct sky....

No, they were just sand dunes, white in the moonlight.

The poplar grove showed up a dark mass, rearing up sharp-pointed and motionless.

No, there were only the narrow, elongated shadows of the sand dunes, long dead shadows.

She placed her head on her hands, her elbows on her knees and also stretched out her neck to look, and saw farther than the horizon where the mirages hovered, saw as far as Shevirino with its fair, the laughter and jokes, the hot caresses... strong, crude, embracing arms... a curly head....

Her voice, strange and distant, was close to him.

"Like a graveyard.... A fine place!... All white!..."

VI

It seemed that it had all happened not long ago: quite recently the wheels had creaked in the forest and a woman's voice had come drifting through the trees, quite recently....

"That must come down," the old man would sometimes say, kicking at a dead tree.

She would look at him with wide-open startled eyes: the leafless branches sketched a dry and grey picture of infertility on the blue sky and naked roots jutted brokenly out of the shifting sand.

When she had married the old man, she had often sat here in the deep shade on the soft, silky, green grass and the abundant foliage had whispered over her head. And she felt all the horror of time passing.

Since then they had felled many of those trees and the forest was growing thinner and thinner. The sands advanced, unnoticeably but constantly and inexorably. They crept forward innocently with their fine imperceptible tongues and convolutions, made their way between the bushes, between roots, between flowers and grass and before you could look round the roots had dried up, the flowers wilted, the grass had disappeared, the birds had flown away and the naked trees stood there sadly alone.

Then again all this was forgotten and they made their way to the shade cast by living trees, they lay on the green grass while the irrepressible birds darted about noisily in the foliage above—and so the years passed.

Sometimes it seemed to the mistress of the mill that Grandad would die the next day, in a week's time or at most, in a month's time. She listened carefully to his breathing, watched his ever slower movements and his trembling head and hands.

The roof darkened in colour, the straw became dishevelled and began to hang down. Only the water was un-

changed, tinkling with its old quiet, pensive, lazily sleepy ring.

And all those farmyard sounds that had once burst so unexpectedly and merrily into the scene—the clucking of the hens, the gobbling of the geese, the grunting of the pigs and the young mistress's resonant voice—all were gradually modulated, gradually resolved and were dissipated in that lazily sleepy, eternal tinkle.

It was as though there were no people, no animals, no cares or worries, only just that one millhouse with its blackened dishevelled thatch that stared out unwinking, with the slowly turning wheel and quietly ringing water.

VII

Dull, sunless days, without colour and without form, came as a reminder that time was passing fruitlessly and irretrievably.

Everything was swallowed up, contours disappeared and the whirling sands rose up to the very heavens. In desperation they travelled in leaning columns, obscuring the air, the sun and the blue distance.

It seemed then that there would be no more happy days, no more joy, laughter and loud, young voices. There was an implacable, blind despondency in those turbid vacillations.

Sorrow came grimly crawling on.

The mill, the people, the willows and the farm all seemed small, insignificant.

On such days as this the mistress would scream angrily and longingly.

"What use are you?... What can I do with you? Will anything ever come of you? I can lie with you a hundred years without results.... You might bring me a young man so that I could get children ... you old devil!..."

In his confusion he would put her off, blinking and smiling.

"You don't worry . . . you . . . that is . . . wait a bit. . . . Perhaps something will happen. . . ."

He would raise his brows, fondle her with his trembling hands but she could only smell the rotting, earthy smell of senility.

"Ugh, you old swine, I curse you, you stinking old devil, why don't you peg out, it's time you were dead. . . ."

And she would rock to and fro in spasms of helpless sobbing.

The old man would stamp about in pitiful confusion and then would frown and say to her in his broken voice:

"I've always respected you and what do you do? What were you? Eh? How much longer have I left to live? Everything is yours. . . . Now I'll tear up the will and where will you be. . . . You can die of starvation!. . ."

"I will die . . . and I don't want your mill, I'll go away!. . ."

And the sobs came deeper but suppressed.

The next morning the sun would come out over sands that had settled again and would cast long, golden shadows; again the geese would gobble softly and the black wheel would turn, in morose concentration, while the mill would stare as ever with that same fixed stare.

VIII

The sound of young, healthy voices, laughter and joking in the forest came like a distant memory.

A cart turned the bend in the road and after it another with a young man and woman walking beside it.

They were laughing, pushing each other and their faces were beaming with joy. It was just as if there were no blackened mill, no dried up forest, no old husbands, no sorrow and hopeless waiting. In their every move-

ment, in every insignificant word, in the constant laughter that bubbled over for no apparent reason filling the air around them, they continued the business of youth, the special business of unbridled joy that sought no reason for its existence.

The mistress looked at them frowning and unfriendly.

"That's enough of your antics!"

"What's it got to do with you, you old hag!"

Her face turned red as though it had been struck with a whip and her high-pitched screams and curses resounded angrily through the forest.

"Good-for-nothing brats, playing the fool round here with your he-he-he and ha-ha-ha, you were sent here for work and think you're on a petting party ... couldn't find another place for it.... I won't let them grind your corn and you can go back with empty hands and see what you get from your boss...."

Her screams, howls and curses, however, could not dull the cold and horror of the longing aroused in her.

"Old ... old ... old...."

That day everything fell from her hands and the old man could not move for her curses.

Old!

Yes, she was old....

She listened to her own coarsened voice. She felt her own heavy body. The little mirror told her the same story.

Slowly, day by day, wrinkle by wrinkle, one grey hair after another and ... old age where there was no youth, no happiness, no caresses, no baby's cries....

"Oh—oh—oh!..."

She howled, she broke the dishes, she threw pots at the old man. Then she grew quieter and looked at him without a flicker of an eyelid.

"Are you crazy?"

Without moving an eyebrow, without the twinge of a muscle, she stared at him. He moved about, a kindly old

man with a doddering head, he moved like those do who have one foot in the grave. But then he had always been like that, ever since she had known him.

It had been difficult, at first it had been extremely difficult and awful. Her hands had trembled, the powder had spilled and nothing came of it.

When the old man drank it up for the first time and noticed nothing, she wanted to rush to him and, with eyes fixed in horror and a tongue that would not form words, whisper:

"Spit it out, spit it out."

Then she got used to it and gave him the powders every day, helping him on his way.

The old man took ill, could scarcely drag his feet, he creaked like an old tree and the time dragged on.

Then he died suddenly.

IX

When the sands turned rosy in the evening twilight, the mistress called her husband in to supper.

"Hi, old man, come on in."

Her voice was swallowed up by the heavy, calm silence. There was not even the usual echo from the forest with its distant red tree-tops.

"Sup-per. . . ."

The water made its usual tinkling sound. . . .

The mistress looked in the barns, in the house, chased a hen and her chickens out, bolted the door so that the pigs would not get in and set off for the sand-hill—the old man was lying there on his face, his grey beard buried in the soft, golden sand and his bony, senile fingers clutching at it.

She howled at the top of her voice, her screaming lamentations resounding over the dead body, but no more

than a few paces away silence reigned over the heavy, motionless, dead sands.

"Why did you leave me all alone? Who is there left to me? Who will protect me?"

And the woman with dishevelled grey plaits, with a flabby, wrinkled, tear-stained face leaned forward and dropped on to the dead man lying there, his beard protruding from under his neck and his bald scalp already cold; she was filled with longing and pity for the man to whom she had grown accustomed.

X

It seemed that nothing had changed. The black wet wheel turned slowly and pensively, concerned only with its own affairs, the tiny stream of water poured on to it with its tinkling gurgle and the mill with its bedraggled black straw had a dead look about it which promised nothing.

When the old woman returned from the memorial requiem read in the church a year later she sat down on the sand by the wall of the mill and wept. She was not crying for her dead husband but from the sudden recollection that her life had passed dully and imperceptibly: soon her time would come and she would die without ever having known happiness. In the long run she had grown accustomed to the old man and now it was empty and lonely in that scanty forest of dried-up trees.

The mill still looked at her blindly and heavily, never taking its deathlike eye off her. Nevertheless she had to live, she had to get up in the morning and do her housework, feed the poultry, pour grain into the mill and argue with the farmers.

She tried to rent the mill but nobody wanted to settle in such an out-of-the-way place and she herself was no longer drawn to Shevirino and its fair or by the shows

in the booths there. She did not know the girls who danced there now for they had not been born when she herself was a girl.

She hired a labourer.

He came to her, morose, badly dressed and with a hangdog look about him. He slept in the millhouse over the eternally humming millstones and when autumn came moved into the warm outer room of the cottage. The mistress kept him well in hand and he worked day and night, gloomy and silent, never raising his eyes.

Once he did raise his eyes and said to her:

"Pay me off, missus."

"What for?"

"I'm off."

"Where will you go?"

"I'll look for a place, in the town, perhaps . . . maybe I'll find something in the village." He turned from her and gazed at the rutty road that disappeared in the forest.

"Vanyusha," she began, her voice trembling with a new tenderness—up till then she had called him brusquely "Vanka"—"Vanyusha, where is there to go? Is it so bad with me?"

"Not so bad but still I'm going."

"If you stay I'll give you a rise."

"I'm fed up."

That night she went to him but he cursed her coarsely and cynically and chased her away.

"You old bitch.... Get to hell out of here...."

But she fed him well, clothed him and took care of him. There was always vodka for him and he began to bully the old woman. Then he grew sedate and began living with her but she did not give him a bill of sale on the mill as she had promised, she only made out a will in his favour.

He immediately felt himself to be the master of the mill and the old black wheel took on a brighter look

from the patches of freshly planed boards with which he repaired it. Once again the roof took on a merry look, thatched with golden, evenly cut, fresh straw.

XI

Cries of drunken bravado, shouts of laughter, and noisy songs resounded through the foliage and through the briars from behind the willow grove.

"Hi.... Say it.... Burn it.... Hold him...."

The heavy tramp of iron-shod jackboots, the screams and squawks of the women, the whole of that drunken merriment was strangely out of tune with the pensive, flickering patterns of sunlight trembling on the grass and the whisper of the scarcely moving tree-tops.

When the drunken hullabaloo died down for a minute the tinkling sounds of the water could be heard, the mill stared out dully, never relaxing its heavy gaze and the wheel kept slowly turning.

Again the shouts, laughter, good-natured curses, maudlin songs and the heavy and irregular trampling reigned insolently, slatternly and drunkenly supreme amidst the pensiveness of the forest repose, drowning the silence and the tinkling colours.

Her brightly shining eyes narrowed to tiny slits, her face wet with perspiration and drunkenly distorted, her thin grey plaits hanging out from under her kerchief, the mistress sat beside a table-cloth set with a cold collation under the willows; in her unsteady hand she held a glass of vodka and sang in a high-pitched penetrating voice, like that of a squealing pig.

Then let us drink,
And let us dance...

"And let us dance..." repeated her neighbour, dully, as though his voice came from under the earth and,

hopelessly shaking his perspiring, dishevelled, drunken head, continued:

And death will come,
And we shall die...

His drunken singing was supported by Ivan whose unruly feet refused to go where their owner wanted them in the dance he was trying angrily to stamp out.

"He kept on at me so . . . gave me no peace . . ." rattled off a young, newly married, rosy-cheeked woman, nodding her head with its naive but cunning peasant eyes. "And as for me, well, I'm not too proud.... Not like them women from the town, you know the sort!... All paint and powder, all fancy on top but when you undress 'em, there's nothing underneath...."

"And we shall die . . ." maintained the neighbour.

"... d—i—e..." reiterated the forest.

"... d—i—e..." added Ivan heavily.

"Eat up, people, eat up. Enjoy yourselves!... I'm sure you're welcome. We've got plenty of everything, enough for our lifetime, and the mill keeps going day and night!... We've got plenty, haven't we, Vanyusha, darling?"

"More than plenty . . . and we shall d-i-e...." He twisted his mouth painfully, having great difficulty in controlling his tongue. "When you die, old girl, the first thing I'll do, I'll buy myself a pair of fancy boots.... Eh? Who am I?... It works for me.... I'll hire a labourer.... I'm the b-b-oss, that's who...."

When the forest, the mill and the daily round of work again appeared through the fog of passing drunkenness, the mistress looked around, frowning and suspicious.

"You're miserable for that fancy tart of yours, are you? D'you think I don't see what's going on? I see everything, damn you...."

"What's wrong with you, off your head?"

"I see what's going on. . . ."

"Phew!. . . We live like wolves in the forest and never hear a human voice. . . ."

"Don't we? Then why do you keep running around and looking here and there. . . ."

"You can go to hell, damn you!. . . Starts seeing things in her old age. . . . Leave me alone. . . ."

Something that had not been there before came between them and stayed. Something suspicious and elusive was hidden behind the trees, in the mill, made itself felt in the house, in the forest glade, in the sound of his voice, in the most insignificant words and expressions.

"Give me your piece," said the mistress when they sat down to dinner.

"I've cut a piece for you."

"So what? You take mine."

If the young man was late working in the mill or busy arguing with the farmers who came to grind their corn, she would never begin to eat or drink until he came.

"Vanyusha, come and eat before it gets cold."

"In a minute. You eat yourself."

"Never mind me, you eat. . . ."

They would begin cursing each other and the squawky, high-pitched voice of the woman would carry through the forest mixed with the coarse profanity of her labourer.

Grandad would come to her during the night. He would come softly and unnoticed and stand there beside her, his calm face and beard white. Sometimes he would lie face down, his beard stuck in the golden sand and his fingers clutching at it.

She was not afraid because there was no reproach in his face and figure. Her conscience had long since fallen asleep and he did not awaken it.

Nevertheless in the serenity, the imperturbability of that unsuspecting face she could read:

"The same will happen to you!..."

With a groan she gritted her teeth in her sleep and woke up soaking wet with cold perspiration and stared in hatred, stared at the young, strong, healthy face of the labourer who lay snoring, his strong arm thrown back and his mouth open.

She got up softly like a cat, her eyes, too, flashing green like a cat's, and with a soft, cat-like tread, never once taking her eyes off the sleeping man, crept to the corner and began fumbling under the bench. She trembled, so painfully did she want to take the bright, shining axe and crash its sharp edge down on that open mouth.

He awoke and looked in astonishment at her eyes staring wildly at him.

"What are you staring at? I haven't turned to gold, have I?"

"I'll choke you with my own hands.... I'll pull your guts out of you.... I know what you're thinking of, I've noticed it for a long time...."

The whole day was filled with their curses, profanity, threats and jealous reproaches. He beat her mercilessly, with that particularly cruel lust with which men beat women.

Beaten and disfigured she would lie in bed for weeks but no sooner did she get up again, no sooner was she able to move her swollen lips than she would hiss at him:

"You've got everything ready.... With that girl of yours.... I suppose she's hiding somewhere round here.... Eat, taste the porridge first, you've probably had time to put something in it...."

The more he beat her the more she ate her way into his heart with her thousands of suspicions, reproaches and complaints.

The sun shone as before, patches of gold quivered on

the ground, the sands lay there yellow, the water rang, the bright daytime colours sang their melodious song but over all, hiding and crushing everything, lay a stifling haze and the people were suffocated.

XII

Ivan put on his best trousers, a clean shirt and a coat and began to pull his belt in tightly.

The mistress came in and saw him.

"Oh, you good-for-nothing, oh, you skunk, going to that girl again . . ." she started and broke off suddenly.

There was an expression of serenity, of inner peace on his face, all the cruelty and evil passion of the past years was gone.

"Where are you off to, Vanyusha?" asked the mistress, her heart sinking.

Ivan pulled his belt tight, slipped the end into the runner, took up his bag and cap, turned to the icons and began crossing himself and bowing low.

"Good-bye, missus, don't think bad of me. I'm going away. We can't live together, look how we hurt each other."

He bowed low to her, threw his bag over his shoulder and went out.

She ran after him and seized him by the sleeve, hung on to him, dragging after him and sobbing.

"Why are you leaving me all alone? Oh, darling, sweetheart . . . why don't you like me? What have I done to offend you?. . . Vanyusha, come back, everything is yours, I don't want a single thing for myself. . . ."

"No, old lady, we can't live together."

He shook off her hand and went away.

She ran forward trembling from head to foot, her face twitching spasmodically; foaming at the mouth she screamed in a voice filled with malice:

"You lazy bum, may you die of hunger on the road, may every Christian spit in your filthy mug... may you die from hunger under the fence, you poverty-stricken cripple!..."

Choking in her nervous anxiety to have her say as quickly as possible, she screamed at him:

"I'll tear up the will... you can die!..."

He stopped, turned round and facing the mill spat angrily at it.

"May that mill collapse, curse it. It's eaten my heart out."

She overtook him again at the turn of the rough road leading into the forest, hung on to his neck and gave herself up to spasms of silent sobbing.

"Vanyusha, I've never had a moment's happiness in my life. You know I spent all my youth with an old man and there were no children.... Now you're all I have...."

He became sorry for the woman. He stopped on the road.

"Come back, I won't say a word against you...."

He freed himself from her grasp and went off quickly along the road; in that thin and dying forest the man, walking firmly and with determination, without once looking back, was visible for a long time as was the woman lying on the ground beating her head on the sand gleaming yellow amongst the young grass shoots. The dark mill gazed down indifferently and coldly at them both; the wheel continued slowly turning.

XIII

The days and the months dragged on in miserable loneliness. Life had become a burden to her. Wherever she went, whatever she did, everything reminded her of Ivan.

She thought well over everything and blamed herself for what had happened. If he were to come back, life

would go along differently, tenderly and quietly, with cordiality.

In sorrow she watched the sands advancing steadily into the forest, as implacable as old age.

The secret hope that he could return lived on in her heart and frightened her with all the horror of its improbability.

The old woman had already forgotten how many times the mill and the forest had been covered with a white mantle of snow. The sands lay quiet when they were fettered by the frosts and the bare branches of the trees waited motionless for the coming warmth and dry winds.

One night, when the blizzard had died down and the snow lay in heavy cakes weighing down the branches of the trees, when the cold winter moon had not yet risen, somebody tapped at the window.

"Who's there?"

Perhaps it was just a log crackling in the frost or a lump of frozen snow falling from the roof?

She pressed her face against the frosty window, shading the light with her hand. The silhouette of the millhouse showed mournfully through the white haze. She peered keenly and saw something that was either the figure of a man or a tree that cast a shadow on the window.

Her heart beat faster in anticipation and again she asked tremulously:

"Who's there?"

"Let me in."

Holding the door apprehensively she opened it just a crack; in strode a man in rags with a morose, wan and pain-ridden face, bringing a cloud of steam with him.

"Vanyusha!"

She flew to him. She cried and laughed but he just sat there looking glumly at the floor between his knees.

"The mill still stands there as it always did."

"Of course it does, Vanyusha, and it's still working for you and me.... Now we'll live well together...."

"No good man turned up to set fire to it."

"How can you, Vanyusha.... It's our breadwinner. We're the owners, you and I...."

In the warm room, over a steaming samovar, he told her the usual story of a vagrant worker. He had worked like a horse to save up a little money to get back to his village and get his own farm and family, but in the intervals when he was not working but wandering from place to place looking for another job, he had eaten up all he had saved.

"Look!" He held up a hand from which a finger was missing. "A machine tore it off and I couldn't work for three weeks."

His tormented eyes had an angry look about them.

During those first days the mistress was beside herself in the effort to feed him well, to seat him in the most comfortable place and all the time she kept looking into his eyes.

At night, however, the old man started coming to her again. He lay face down on the floor and she fancied she saw his beard, a hazy white, like the haze outside. There was not the slightest suggestion of reproach in the whole of that kindly old figure and there was so much that was kind-hearted, that was childishly trustful, that her whole body was trembling when she woke up, and she looked enquiringly into the eyes of her companion.

"If I could only look into your heart.... What have you got there," she said sorrowingly and then, with an evilly distorted face, trembling all over, hissed at him: "You wanted to get a family of your own.... I'm no use to you, you only want the mill and the income, you want to get rid of me.... Oh, you scoundrel!... Oh, murderer!... May you die.... I'll chase you out and you can turn up your toes under somebody's fence...."

And again the reproaches, the ever wakeful suspicion, again the heart-rending screams of a woman being beaten and all the time that dead gaze of things that did not speak. And the people were tiny and insignificant under that dull and heavy gaze full of mortal power.

Days, weeks, months and years passed, establishing the terrible habit of life.

And again the passing of time was felt only because here and there trees that had once been weighted down with their whispering foliage now stood gaunt and black, lifting their dead arms to the sky. The sands quietly but irrevocably took possession of the forest.

On those rare occasions when the mistress was absent on business the water tinkled merrily, and wood pigeons cooed amongst the dried up branches of the trees. Ivan went out and sat on the sand-hill, took his head between his hands and was lost in thought.

He dreamed that he was on the highroad in the fierce summer heat, that he went from farm to farm but nobody was hiring labourers and there was not a drop of water to moisten his parched mouth. He had forgotten to dream of a family and his own farm. And it seemed that there was nothing all round him, only the mill that stood there black and frowning. The mill seemed to swell. The doors grew as large as the gates, the huge wheel towered up higher than a tree and the ragged roof rose up to the grey clouds. Wherever he looked there was the black mill.

Look....

He opened his eyes and shook his head, the sun was shining, the water tinkling and through the trees the mill loomed black.

"Och, I must have slept. I'll go and pour grain into the mill."

He got up and went back to work.

The mistress came back and the tinkling of the water, the forest and the cooing doves disappeared behind a screen of screams, curses and noisy malice.

XIV

Ivan grew thoughtful. He ate little and scarcely ever said a word; he stopped beating the mistress. That was what worried her more than anything else, he had stopped beating her. Night after night she did not sleep, she kept the bread and other eatables under lock and key and watched closely to make sure he did not put anything into her food during dinner.

"Why don't you say something? Why do you keep your mouth shut, parasite?..."

Early one morning when there were no farmers at the mill Ivan went to the barn, fumbled around there, took something and, with a stern and morose look on his face, came right up to her.

"Come along."

"Where to? May you die, may the swamp-fever get you, may cholera tie you up in knots ... may you...."

He knocked her down with his fist, seized her by her plaited hair and dragged her along.

The old woman grabbed frantically at branches, bushes, at the grass and sand and the howls that went up were like those of an ox being slaughtered.

When the mill had been left behind and the surrounding, indifferent forest absorbed her cries filled with the horror of approaching death, the old woman struggled to her feet, trembling like a leaf.

"Ivanushka, where are you taking me?" she asked.

"Get along...."

They went on past dried-up lakes, past forest glades covered with white sand. When they were in a thicket tangled with wild hops, he said:

"Get down on your knees and pray to God."

In his lowered hand hung a heavy, gleaming axe.

She rolled on the ground and wrapped her arms round his legs.

"Dearest, don't damn your own soul and mine.... Let me look again on the light of day...."

But he answered her calmly and coldly:

"You've tortured me, I can't stand it any longer.... I see nothing of the day. It's all the same to me, I'm caught in the toils, anyway, and can't get out.... And you ought to have been dead a long time, you old bitch...."

"Vanyusha, God won't give you any happiness.... You mark my words...."

She crawled on the ground, grasping at him in her horror of dying. He stepped back a pace.

"So you don't want to pray, you old hag. All right, then, go as you are...."

Stepping back with one foot he raised the axe.

She squealed, but it was not a squeal of fear but a bestial howl of malice that choked her.

"The will, the will.... I've torn it up!"

He stopped with the axe raised above his head and she rolled on the ground roaring with hysterical laughter, spasmodically clawing at the ground, the foam bubbling on her distorted lips.

"I tore it up!... I tore it up!... I tore it up!..."

And the forest that hemmed them in gloomily on all sides took up those terrible words and repeated them dully.

"Tore it up!... Tore it up!..."

A raven seated on a dry bough croaked:

"Gone... gone... gone!..."

He dropped the axe and ran off stumbling and tripping, holding his head between his hands. Over him lay a brownish sky, brownish air lost in the turbid brown

gloom of the forest. The sand rose up to the heavens and the wavering columns of sand moved along, constantly changing their form, their huge heads lost in the swirl of piled up clouds.

No matter where he looked, it was everywhere the same, not a gleam of light, no end to his despair.

XV

Time did not wait but went on as though nothing particular had happened. The mistress looked after the poultry, argued with the farmers, measured the grain, Ivan ran the mill, trimmed the millstones, repaired any damage.

"Listen here, missus.... If you don't make out another will I'm off, I've got nothing to stay here for and that's my last word."

"Let's go to the priest. He had the will before and he can make out another for us."

They went to the priest.

The priest came out on to the porch of his house and looked darkly at the pair of them.

"Father, we've come to see you."

"Why is it," said the priest, not listening to what they had to say, "why is it that you two don't get married? Why do you live like heathens? Do you want your souls to go down into Gehenna? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, old woman. I won't give you the sacrament until you do penance."

"How can I marry him, father?" said the mistress through her tears. "He beats me to death, there's not a whole spot on my body. What did he think of doing, only a week ago? Took me into the forest and tried to kill me, I swear that's God's honest truth. And that will you have, in his favour, keep it. But if I'm found dead or if I die, that means he'll have killed me.... So I want you

to know and when I'm dead they can do what they like."

Ivan staggered back. Cold sweat poured down his face.

"And so the will wasn't torn up!..."

His ears rang and he did not hear what was being said.

"So that's what you've got in mind? You want to go to prison? All right, it'll soon be time for the hay-making, so you can come in a couple of weeks' time and cut the grass on the church meadow.... That'll be instead of a penance, to work off your sins.... And mind you come or I may go to the police... you know.... And you, old woman, had better make your will over to the church.... Your sins are terrible...."

The noose was drawn tightly round Ivan's neck. He had not will power enough to go away and apart from that he had grown unaccustomed to heavy work; there was a constant uproar at the mill with no rest or let-up. The mistress never ceased her screams: murderer, jail-bird, cut-throat—and he beat her with savage joy.

XVI

Whether he was eating his supper with the mistress at sunset, trading with the farmers or pouring grain into the mill hopper, there was always a third standing nearby. Ivan would raise his eyes and was always confronted by the black silhouette of the mill.

There was steady, modulated speech in the humming of the millstones and in the resonant clatter of the mill-wheel. Day and night somebody was talking to him ceaselessly.

He would stand still, lean his head to one side and listen. He seemed to hear long drawn-out, monotonous sounds.

"... O-ho-ho-ho-o... ha-ha-a-a-oo-oo... ho-ho-o...."

A strange language that nobody could understand but which nevertheless expressed human thoughts. Like the mist that hangs over a river in autumn these ideas were unclear, patchy, changing and melting, their indistinct outlines vaguely forming into:

"You're... mine.... You're mine.... You can't get away.... You can't get away.... You're mine...."

Ivan learned to treat them all like living beings, the lazily turning wheel, the black, gloomy millhouse with the hanging thatch, the monotonously tinkling water, and the millstone that continued its tireless speech, monotonous yet constantly changing.

"Why don't you come in to supper?"

"You see, the mill won't let me go."

Or:

"The wheel was in a bad temper today, almost pulled my arm out of the shoulder."

Or:

"The millstone is happy today, keeps dancing and dancing, so fast I don't have time to scrape up the flour."

When they were tired of their squabbling, fighting and cursing, they began their drunken carousals. Neighbours came from the farms, the farmers drank deeply and everything was turned topsy-turvy.

When Ivan had been drinking, people were afraid of him. His eyes, red like raw meat, glared savagely from under his frowning brows; he tore open his shirt collar and wandered about, all hairy. At times he would weep drunken tears, his head in his hands.

"My poor head, you've been sold for a penny, for a pinch of tobacco. What have I seen of this world? I've seen no life, and no joy, nothing but sand, shifting sand that is smothering my whole life.... Curse it...."

He stared long and heavily at the mill which was standing just as it had always been, just as it should be, as it had been when the old man was alive and his

father before him, black, serene and lop-sided with its moss-covered wheel turning imperturbably: the sight of it aroused undying hatred in Ivan.

"Curse you!"

He seized an axe and began madly hacking at the mill. The axe-head sunk deeply into the blackened wood as he struck at it with a full swing of his arms, the chips flying in all directions. The door split in two with a crack and fell from its hinges.

"Tie him up, tie him up!... He'll smash everything!... Tie him up!..."

The chips flew on all sides and the wall of the mill-house gaped open.

"Don't come near me, I'll kill you!..."

The heavy steel axe bit deeper and deeper into the blackened old timber as the man with a face purple from strain slashed again and again, screaming with pleasure. In a moment it would collapse and the forest would reverberate with the laughter of a man freed.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho...."

"Tie him up.... Tie him up ... hit him!... Oh, Lord, he's killing me...."

"Ho-ho-ho.... Ha-ha-ha...."

The guests and the farmers came running up, but they were afraid to go near Ivan who stood with the gleaming axe in his hands. With difficulty they knocked the axe out of his hand with a stick and threw him on to the ground, pulled his hands behind his back and dragged him, breathing heavily in his wrath, under the willows.

Next morning, no sooner had dawn broken over the sands than Ivan took his axe and the whole day through worked energetically repairing the damaged walls and making a new door.

They did not survive each other for long, both of them died within a short space of time, tormented, fatigued,

but accustomed and reconciled to a life devoid of all meaning.

When they were carried off on the hearse, the mill, half-ruined, with wisps of blackened straw hanging from its lop-sided thatch, looked at the coffins with that same passionless, vague and meaningless stare. The slimy, moss-grown wheel turned gloomily, slowly and indifferently.

Implacably the sands moved on.

For a long time the half-buried, blackened ruins of the mill stood there. Then they, too, were levelled. The expanse of sand stretched as far as the river.

On moonlight nights there was a mirage in the air—a mirage of little white cottages and poplar trees, the coins in the women's ornaments tinkling and through the tinkling silence, through tinkling tears could be heard: "And on his little right arm, a birthmark. . . ."

The mirage faded away, the sands gleamed white and motionless, dead, black shadows spread from the sandhills.

1908

Switchman

I

"Hi, Ivan, get a move on, the station-master's shouting for you!"

Ivan the switchman, a little man of about forty with a besotted, care-worn face, covered from head to foot in soot and grease, placed the broom with which he had been sweeping the platform in a corner and ran to the office.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, standing to attention like a soldier in the doorway.

The station-master did not pay any attention to him but continued writing. Ivan remained standing to attention with his cap held pressed under his armpit.

Although he had not a minute to spare he dared not ask a second time: it was his shift that day and although he had been on the go since eight o'clock in the morning

there was still plenty left to do—sweep the station, sweep the permanent way, examine the points and the signal wires, clean the lamps and lamp-glasses, fill the lamps with oil, chop wood for the two days' holiday and carry it to the station building, sweep out the first- and second-class waiting-rooms—and many other things he remembered that still had to be done. It was already past four, twilight was falling and he still had to light the lamps at the points.

Placing a horny hand to his mouth, Ivan coughed cautiously to attract attention to himself.

"Haven't you lit the lamps at the points yet?" asked the station-master, raising his head.

"No, sir, I'll run and light 'em right now."

"When you've lit them go and clean out the cowshed: the cow's up to her knees in dung. You never can do anything in time. That's why the cow's hoofs are always ailing."

"Number five comes through in ten minutes," Ivan put in warily.

"All right, see the train through and then. . . ."

"Yes, sir."

There was no question of his objecting. Ivan closed the door behind him and ran to the lamp room. In that tiny, cupboard-like room, some twenty lamps of various sizes with cleanly polished glasses stood on the shelves. Ivan selected a number of lamps, placed them in a box of thick sheet metal and set out for the points.

There was no wind. The frost had increased and it nipped his ears, face and hands. Evening twilight fell softly over the station building, the permanent way and the local houses. The snow crunched underfoot. Here and there could be seen people hurrying to finish their work in anticipation of the rest they would enjoy over the coming holiday from their never-ending daily work and constant worry.

Running from one set of points to another Ivan lit the lamps and placed them in position. Here and there along the line red and green lights appeared, and in the sky the stars, too, lit up one after another, sparkling and flashing through the frosty half-light.

II

From somewhere far, far away down the railway line came a long, monotonous, dismal sound; it held on for a time in the frosty air and then died away. For a second Ivan listened, then ran to the hut, took out his lantern and horn, and dashed off as fast as his legs would carry him down the track, away beyond the station to the most distant set of points that showed up like a lonely red star burning in the white blanket of the snowy desert. It was a long way to run. At last Ivan reached the points. He took hold of the lever, pressed the release with his foot and pulled hard: the bars screamed as they pulled over the rails moving them on to a siding. In the distance there appeared an indistinct and at the same time clumsy-looking something; it grew bigger and bigger as though it were crawling out from somewhere; two fiery eyes gleamed and then, clear and sharp, the whistle of a locomotive sounded. The sound of steam pouring out of the engine whistle was carried in all directions and hung still in the frosty air, it seemed that it would never end. Then the whole train came in sight as it rounded a curve and the rails began to tremble under the weight of the oncoming giant; the impatient sound was painful to the ears. At last, however, it stopped and then gave three short, distinct blasts.

Ivan then placed the horn to his lips, pursed them in a special way, blew, turned red, and played his little tune. In answer to the monster that was advancing with a rumble from the distance he sent the thin, whining,

plaintive note of the horn, a sound that ate into your heart. It dragged on hopelessly, always one and the same note, in the evening dusk, in the middle of a snowed-up plain where the rails ran away into infinity.

The plaintive note of the horn seemed to say that there was no need for the train to hurry, ahead there were stations just like the hundred it had already passed, the same buildings, bells, platform, station-master, staff, sidings running away from the main line, that here everything was just as dismal and monotonous and everybody was busy with his own affairs, that everybody was waiting impatiently to spend the holidays in his family circle and nobody had any time for those who were freezing on the open platforms of the brake vans or peering intently ahead from the engine footplate. Then the horn seemed to think better of it and gave three short toots—toot—to-o-ot—t-o-o-ot; it wanted to say that although the note was the same, whining and dismal, still there was a chance to run to the station, drink up a glass of vodka and eat a bit of rotten herring, get warmed up, pass the time of day with the railway men and then—off on the road again. And indeed life was like that—work, work, day in and day out, weeks, months, years until you forgot and did not know what rest meant. And when, at last, the time for rest came, it was just like arriving on a train at a lonely station in the steppes and being shunted into the third siding.

But the locomotive obeyed the signal. It was already rumbling over the points, it puffed and blew, its steamy breath poured out of its nostrils and spread on both sides in a white blanket over the silent, frozen earth. The engine was apparently slowing down, for the wagons ran into each other, their buffers rattling and clanging. Ivan leant on the lever and the train, banging, screaming and squeaking with the scraping of iron against iron, rattled over the points into the siding. The engine passed

the switchman, then came the tender and the wagons, one by one. Some twenty, thirty of them had passed, all the time running into each other, clattering and banging; here and there on the train could be seen the figure of a man, wrapped in heavy clothing, turning a brake wheel. It was a huge heavily-laden goods train. Then came the last wagon, its tail-lamp casting a red glow in the frosty dusk.

The switchman ran to overtake the train in order to reach the next points before it, and so switch it to another siding. Although the train had slowed down very considerably and was now moving very slowly it was terribly difficult to overtake it. Ivan, panting and out of breath and feeling his legs giving way under him, drew level with the last wagon but had not strength enough left to grasp the handrail. He grabbed at it a couple of times but his frozen, benumbed fingers could not hold on and he almost fell under the wheel. At last he managed to get hold of the footboard, dragged himself up and for several minutes held on motionless, unable to get his breath. The train was now crawling through the station, the platform sailed slowly past.

The switchman jumped down and ran past the slowly moving train to a small hut into which led wires that worked a number of points. "Whew, what a heavy devil!" he muttered, overtaking the head of the train. He ran quickly into the hut where there was a whole jungle of levers to work the points. He pulled one of them and the train, turning on to a siding came to a halt far from the station in the middle of a field: here it had to wait and allow the mail train to go through. The switchman threw the points back on to the main line along which the mail train would come.

"Now I can go and clear out the cowshed," he decided and set off through the station to the yard at the back.

"Where are you going?'" asked the assistant station-master.

"The station-master told me to clean the cow...."

"Why isn't the platform swept?"

"The station-master said clean out...."

"You should do it at the proper time. It's a holiday tomorrow and you can't get into the station for filth. Get it swept up at once!"

"Yes, sir."

The assistant was just going away when he stopped short and shouted back:

"And bring firewood for two days to my house tonight. On a holiday it's impossible to get hold of any of you drunken devils."

The assistant went away. Ivan took his broom and began to sweep the platform. "It's a funny thing," he thought to himself as he swung his besom right and left. "Nowadays a man can tear himself into a hundred pieces. Seven pairs of hands wouldn't be enough...."

"Hi, Ivan!"

"What's the matter?" asked Ivan running to the door of the luggage room where the luggage clerk was standing.

"Where the hell have you been? Are you crazy or drunk already before the holidays have begun: the lamps in the first-class waiting-room still haven't been lit. Passengers are coming in and it's as black as pitch in the waiting-room. If you don't like your job you can get to hell out of here...."

"I forgot, Vasily Vasilyevich. Ivan Petrovich told me to get the platform swept, and the station-master wants the cowshed cleaned...."

"Platform! You've got to get everything done in time. Go and light the lamps."

"Yes, sir."

Ivan put down his besom and ran to light the lamps in

the first-class waiting-room. Passengers were already gathering there and in their deportment, in their movements, in the way they walked up and down the room and in the way they gave money to the porters to buy tickets for them Ivan sensed a sort of silent anticipation—the holidays are here and we can take a rest from business and other cares. Ivan lit the lamps and hurried back to finish sweeping the platform. When he had finished with the platform he rushed off to the wood-yard, afraid that he might be sent somewhere or that somebody would find something else for him to do. There were no split logs in the wood-yard so Ivan had to split them himself. Ivan set zealously to work. He had to split wood for all the station buildings but that was not all: he also had to split and carry wood for the apartments and kitchens of the station-master and his assistant. It is true these people had their own servants and he was not supposed to work for them—his job was to look after the points and the permanent way—but if any of his superiors gave him an order there was nothing he could do but obey. Grunting as he worked Ivan continued splitting logs and casting them aside. The pile grew bigger and bigger.

"Looks like enough," he decided and began tying the logs into huge bundles so as to get the job of carrying wood round finished as quickly as he could. When he heaved the first bundle over his shoulder he realized that he had taken too much. Holding on to door-posts and walls he staggered along under the huge burden. He did not drop it, however, he wanted to get rid of the wood as quickly as he possibly could. Four big bundles went to the station's buildings and he still had to carry wood to the station-master and his assistant and that was hardest of all since he had to climb upstairs with the wood; his knees bent under him, his legs trembled. With a tremendous effort, all his muscles tensed, he climbed from

stair to stair, expecting every minute that he would go flying down backwards together with the wood. At last he reached the assistant station-master's kitchen and threw the wood down on the floor.

"Why are you so late? On account of you I couldn't clean up the kitchen. What's the use of washing the floor before you come, you'd only leave your dirt all over it," was the greeting Ivan got from the cook, a nagging, quarrelsome woman with a red nose and always "carrying a load."

Ivan lost his temper.

"What d'you mean, late?! Are you drunk already? Why should I chase round for you?"

"You drunken sot! May you be eternally damned, you miserable swine. I won't let you put your filthy mug inside the door again. I'll tell the master about you, I'll go and tell him now...." And the cook made a determined move to leave the room.

Then Ivan got scared.

"Makrida Spiridonovna, one minute, please.... I came to offer you my respects and I'm always glad.... Shall I empty the slops for you?"

Without waiting for an answer Ivan seized the slop-bucket, ran outside and emptied it. Spiridonovna softened towards him.

"Now fetch me some water."

Ivan brought the water.

"You might split some kindling for the samovar. There won't be time during the holidays."

"The woman's got a nerve, but what can you do with her," thought Ivan as he cut thin spills from a log. "They don't give me time to breathe and then her on top of it. And I can't do anything about it, she'll only complain."

Having shaken her off Ivan went away muttering something about "working a man to death"; he went to the shed where the station-master's cow stood. Chewing

the cud in her melancholy way, the cow looked up with complete indifference as Ivan came in.

"Get over, hay-bag!" shouted Ivan and in his fit of temper hit the cow with the shovel. The cow moved over obediently, lifting her injured leg as she did so. Ivan began throwing out the dung in savage fury.

"Where does she get so much dung from? All she knows is how to eat and mess the place up. If she gave as much milk as she does dung it would be different, but she only eats up the hay and gives nothing. And the station-master.... Isn't there enough milk on the market? If he bought his milk he'd have more money. If you keep such a wolf it's bound to ruin you. And look at that mountain of dung! May you croak, you brute!"

Again he stabbed the shovel at the inoffensive cow who had not the slightest idea of what she had done to deserve such treatment and pressed close to the wall.

The sweat was pouring off Ivan. He was terribly tired and felt he could work no longer but still he had to finish.

"I'll get it done and then go and get a glass and a bite to eat or I'll not last out to the end of the shift."

The dung was at last cleared out. Ivan hit the cow a couple of times more, put the shovel in the corner and went back to the station.

III

The brakemen from the goods train were warming up with tea in the station refreshment room. Ivan went over to the bar, drank a glass of vodka, gasped at its strength, ate a piece of stinking fish to keep it down and bought a whole bottle of vodka with which to celebrate the holiday in a fitting manner at home. He put the bottle in his pocket, went to the plate-layer's hut, took spanner and hammer and set out to inspect the line before the arrival of

the mail train; he stopped on the way and stood for a moment deep in thought. If he were to take the bottle with him he might break it, if he were to leave it in the hut his relief would come and take it—he had a nose like a hound for such things. "I'd better run home with it," thought Ivan and, leaving the permanent way, walked towards a tiny cabin some fifty yards from the railway whose tiny lighted window shone in welcome.

Ivan looked into the cabin: the little room with its huge stove, always dirty and littered with pots and pans, barrels and other household utensils, was today spick and span, the earth floor freshly smeared with clay, the walls whitewashed and the huge stove that took up a good half of the room, was painted with bright blue figures. Under the icons in the far corner the table was covered with a coarse but clean cloth. Before the icons burned a wax candle-end throwing its flickering light on the low ceiling, the blue figures on the stove and the fair heads of the children. Of these latter Ivan had eight: one of them was at that moment still swinging in a cradle hanging from the ceiling.

Although the tired children could scarcely keep their eyes open they were apparently impatiently awaiting Papa before they began their supper. And those blue drawings, and the white walls and the clean table-cloth all served to give Ivan the impression that rest and repose were awaiting him.

He tapped at the window and his wife came out.

"Who's that?" she asked looking out into a night lit only by twinkling stars.

"Take this, I just thought it'd get pinched from the hut."

"Come from work?"

"No, I have to look at the tracks yet."

"Don't stay too long after work, the kids want to sleep."

"I'll be back in half an hour. The mail train's almost due, I'll see it through and then home."

Ivan ran back to the permanent way and walked along tapping with his hammer and occasionally tightening a doubtful nut. He inspected the points, tested the wires, found everything in good order, and returned to the station.

IV

The long mail train, hauled by two locomotives, thundered over the rails. Eddies of snow were thrown up from under its wheels and the steam from the funnels of its two locomotives spread far across the land in a white sheet. The whole train was packed full of people. The conductors were going through the carriages collecting tickets. Ahead of the train an engine whistled rudely.

Passengers were lifting down their bags and bundles from the luggage rack and were tying up their pillows. The train began to slow down. With a screech the brake-shoes squeezed the wheels.

The moment the train reached the platform the station-master signalled to Ivan to ring the first bell; the train only stopped for two minutes. Then off ran Ivan to the luggage van and began heaving out the luggage of passengers who were alighting at that station.

With all his might he threw out bags, trunks and bales looking for the required numbers.

When all the luggage had been thrown out of the van Ivan trundled it on a truck to the luggage room.

"Ivan, where the hell are you? Sound the second bell, I tell you."

The little station bell twice resounded clearly.

"Run and give the engine-driver his pass!"

The switchman took the pass and set off along the

platform, pushing his way through the public. The train was a long one and he had to run almost its entire length. The driver leaned out of his cabin and took the pass from Ivan.

"Third bell!" With his heart fiercely palpitating he ran to the bell and rang it three times. The head conductor gave a whistle, the engine responded angrily and grudgingly, and with a screeching and rattling of metal the train moved off. The platform fell behind and the carriages, their wheels rhythmically tapping over the joints, swayed as they passed along the line one after the other.

Ivan sighed in relief. He had a tour of duty every other day and each time at ten in the evening he strained himself to the utmost unloading luggage; always Ivan had to ring the bell and hand over the pass to the engine-driver and then run and open the signal, that is, every evening he had to do a number of jobs that should have been shared by at least two men and he had been doing this for twenty-two years!

Those twenty-two years had eaten up his life. It seemed to him that all he had ever been able to do and all that he was still able to do was to run and switch over points, give signals, ring bells and light lamps. It seemed to him that this was the easiest, most suitable and most profitable work. He was convinced that he was not capable of doing anything else, that elsewhere he would be useless. He was the father of eight children and he earned fifteen rubles a month. Whenever he ran from one set of points to another to let the trains through, put out the lamps, clean out the cowshed or sweep the platform, one and the same thought was always passing through his head, one and the same sensation—the fear that he had done something wrong, that he had left something undone, that something might go wrong somewhere. Twenty-two years had done their work and it never entered his mind that he might be doing some-

thing else. He could not imagine himself away from the station, the permanent way and the platform. His tour of duty ended at ten o'clock in the evening with the departure of the mail train, and it was only then that with a profound sigh of relief he got rid of the heavy burden of fear and anxiety that something might go wrong.

And so it was on this day. When the train had passed the platform Ivan, with that feeling of incomparable weakness that always overtook him at the end of his day's work and was the accompaniment of that other feeling that a weight had been taken off his shoulders, raised his hand to cross himself and... stopped short. A terrible idea had suddenly possessed him: *he had forgotten to change the points back to the main line after the goods train had passed* and now the mail train was on that line. He was completely overcome by fear, by desperation aroused by this tremendous responsibility. Hatless, his face white as chalk, he ran madly in the direction indicated by the red tail-light of the disappearing train.

Too late! In a second there would be a deafening crash and in the pale half-light of the winter evening a dark mass would rise up above the railway line and the frosty air would be filled with inhuman, senseless screams.

In order not to hear those shrieks Ivan rushed blindly towards a siding along which a shunting engine was moving. Panting breathlessly he reached shining rails gleaming in the headlights of the oncoming engine.

In those few seconds the whole of his past life flashed before his eyes as though lit up by the reflection of the light; he saw the day that had just ended: his tour of duty... the platform... lamps... firewood... the cow... the stove with the blue painted figures... blonde-headed children and... the fatal points.

In that moment of superhuman effort he saw with as-

tounding clarity how he had turned the points on to the main line. . . .Oh, God, *he had left the points in the right position*! He had got mixed up—the mail train was puffing safely along the right route. . . .

Ivan screamed in despair and made a tremendous effort to leap off the rails but at that very moment the moving engine bore down on him with all its mass of iron and steel and burning coals. . . and cut short his life.

V

The driver of the shunting engine stood on the footplate watching the brightly lit rails running towards him. He passed one set of points, then another. He reached out for the whistle cord and pulled it several times. The wheels clattered over the points, a green light flashed past, the plate-layer's hut appeared out of the darkness and disappeared again. Suddenly he jumped to the throttle like a madman screaming in strange voice: "Brake!" The fireman dragged at the brake handle with all his strength, hanging desperately on to the lever.

"God, we've killed a man!. . ."

The brake-shoes creaked, the wheels screamed and steam poured out of the open valves. From behind the engine came an inhuman howl: "Ow, Go. . ." and broke off suddenly. The engine was carried forward another couple of yards and came to a stop.

The driver and fireman jumped down to the ground but could see nothing. In the darkness the wind blew the frozen snow into their eyes. The fireman ran for a lantern and by its light they saw two amputated feet lying beside the rail while behind the engine wheels lay a man.

"Killed him, Mother of God!. . ."

The fireman ran to the station and people began to

arrive. The engine was moved back. Somebody leaned over the man lying on the tracks.

"Dead!..."

Standing in silence they took off their caps and crossed themselves.

Ivan lay motionless between the rails with his head twisted to one side, his eyeballs turned up. The ring of the lantern which hung from his right wrist had torn off the skin and turned it back like a bloody sleeve as far as his shoulder; the arm itself was twisted at the shoulder and thrown back behind his head; on his left side the ribs were driven deeply into his chest.

The people, gathered at the scene of the accident, were talking in low, suppressed voices: they were asking how the accident had occurred, whether the dead man had been drinking, had he cried out when the engine overtook him. Nobody could give a satisfactory answer.

"I had only just been looking out," said the engine-driver to the crowd gathered round him, "and saw the lights at the points. I was thinking of stopping. I was just going to turn round when I saw him right under my headlights.... God! I jumped for ... and he screamed so.... Everything went dark, I knew there was a man under the engine and that I could do nothing...." The engine-driver's voice broke off.

Another gust of wind sprinkled white powder on the dead man and those standing around him. The crowd stood silent. In the engine the impounded steam began gurgling ominously. The driver jumped up on to the footplate, turned a handle and the steam rushed madly out from somewhere under the engine, casting a cloud of warm dampness over all.

"He was walking along as though he wasn't thinking. Must have been going to the points. That's where the engine got him."

"His horn is all crushed but he must have been caught

by his lantern and dragged along or else he'd have been cut in two."

For a moment or two there was again silence.

"Have you sent for the station-master?"

"Somebody's just gone."

"A sad night for his wife, she's left with eight kids."

Lights and the dark silhouettes of people approached from the station. The station-master came up and the assembled crowd made way for him. He took a lantern from one of the clerks and directed it at the dead man: for a moment the light of the lantern flickered across the grim concentrated faces of the people, the rails and sleepers and settled on the pain-distorted face of the dead man and on the whites of his turned-up eyes. The station-master turned and ordered the people to put the body in an empty van.

Some matting was brought and the body lifted on to it: he was already beginning to stiffen. The dislocated arm fell and hung down helplessly.

"What about... all the rest..." said one of those who had lifted the body, as though he were holding something back.

"Over there." The fireman pointed into the darkness.

Somebody with a lantern walked a few steps along the line, the others saw him bend down and pick something up. He returned and carefully placed the amputated feet on the matting.

The body was taken and placed in an empty van standing alone on one of the sidings.

A report drawn up on the spot said: "On such and such a day of November at a station of such and such a railway, Ivan Gerasimov Pelipasov, switchman on duty, peasant of the village of Ulyino, Demyanov Volost, Orel Gubernia, was killed through his own carelessness by shunting engine No. 5 as the latter was proceeding to the round-house."

VI

Ten o'clock in the morning. Passengers were walking up and down the platform. The train was expected, the telegraph had announced its departure from the previous station. The passengers had come out of the waiting-rooms and had taken up their places with their bags and bundles at the edge of the platform, looking from time to time in the direction from which the train was expected to arrive. Gendarmes, rattling their spurs, looked cautiously and suspiciously round. The luggage barrow clattered noisily over the asphalt, forcing the people to move aside. The wheel-tapper came hurriedly along with his long hammer and oil-can; despite the cold he was dressed in a blue unbelted blouse. Out came the station-master, a stoutish gentleman in a red uniform cap and gold-rimmed spectacles, his head slightly raised with the air of a man who is accustomed to give orders.

At this moment a woman was making her way through the public glancing to the right and left; apparently she was looking for somebody. Her face and her eyes were red and tears rolled down from scanty eyelashes that stuck out forlornly from swollen and seemingly slightly upturned eyelids. She tried to check her tears, continually wiping her eyes and blowing her nose on the corner of her kerchief. As soon as she saw the station-master, however, the tears flowed freely from her eyes. She went up to him and holding the corner of the kerchief tightly in her hand pressed it to her quivering lips; she tried to say something but was unable to contain herself and suddenly screamed so that the whole station heard her and everybody turned involuntarily to look at her. The station-master squinted unpleasantly and frowned slightly.

"What's the matter? What do you want, mother?"

"Fa... fa... sir... k-k-killed... k-k-k-killed him...."

The people gathered round stretching their necks to get a look at the station-master and the screaming woman.

"Why is she crying?" they asked one another.

"They say someone was killed here yesterday."

The "clean" public drew to one side and watched events from a distance.

"But what is the matter?"

"She's the wife of the switchman who died yesterday," said a tall porter with a brass label on his chest.

"Then what do you want, mother?"

"My poor Ivan.... Where are we to go now?... We didn't expect.... People came and said your man's been killed.... Yesterday he ran home from work.... I'll finish soon, he said, I'll c-c-come h-h-home...." The woman could not contain herself any longer: she had no sooner told them how her husband had said he would come than she began to sob hysterically, clutching with both hands at her meagre breast.

"Come with me," ordered the station-master leading the way into the station and trying to get her away from the public.

She followed him holding her head on one side and sobbing spasmodically.

"So you need help, do you?"

"Which way am I to turn with my orphans, sir... we've nothing to eat.... Can't Your Honour give me something from the railway, some sort of help?"

The station-master took a wallet from his pocket and gave the woman three rubles from it.

"This is from me, you understand, I'm giving it to you as a private individual; it is just as if somebody else gave it to you. The railway administration won't give you anything, they are not responsible in such cases. Your husband was killed through his own carelessness. He was careless, you understand? The railway is not responsible in such cases."

"What are we to do? They say it's possible to get a pension, if I don't, I'll die of hunger with the children.... In the name of Christ don't desert us..." and the woman bowed so low that her hands touched the ground.

"But I tell you that in such cases the railway doesn't bear the responsibility. Listen," the station-master turned to a conductor who had just come up, "explain to her that the railway administration won't give her anything. She can, of course, take the matter to court but she'll gain nothing by that, only waste time and money."

The station-master went away. The woman stood still, shaking from her choking sobs and constantly wiping her eyes and her wet, red face with the corner of her kerchief.

"So you see, Alexeyevna, that's how it is. The station-master says nothing can be done and he knows. He helped you as much as he could like the kind man he is, but the railway isn't responsible. If it was the railway's fault you could take them to court, but in this case it's no use. So go along, Alexeyevna, the train's coming now."

She went slowly away. The people standing on the platform saw her walking along the permanent way and one of the gendarmes shouted:

"Get off the line, get along, the train's due," and she stepped down from the embankment. For some time her red kerchief was visible amongst the bare trees of the station garden and then it disappeared behind the last trees.

1891

Two Deaths

A GREY-EYED GIRL with a shawl over her head came to the Moscow Soviet, to headquarters.

There was a threatening October sky, cadets were crawling over the wet roofs and, firing between the chimneys, were bringing down careless people crossing Soviet Square.

"I can't do anything useful for the revolution," said the girl. "I'd like to get information for you about the cadets. I don't know anything about nursing—you've got plenty of nurses, anyway. I can't fight, either, I never held weapons in my hands. But if you give me a pass I'll get information for you."

The comrade in a greasy leather jacket, a Mauser automatic stuck in his belt, peered at her intently; his cheeks were sunken from sleepless nights and consumption.

"If you fool us, we'll shoot you," he said. "Do you understand the situation? If they catch you over there, they'll shoot you. If you deceive us, we'll shoot you here!"

"I know."

"Have you thought of everything?"

She straightened the shawl on her head.

"Give me a pass and some document showing that I'm an officer's daughter."

They told her to go into another room and placed a sentry at the door.

On the square outside shots were exchanged—a cadets' armoured car had dashed up, fired and withdrawn.

"The devil alone knows! We've asked for references but what do they mean?" said the comrade with the consumptive face. "Of course she might let us down. All right, give her a pass. There's not much she can tell them about us. If we catch her at any tricks, we'll fix her."

She was supplied with false documents and she went to the Alexandrov Military School on Arbat Street, showing her pass to Red Army sentries at the corners.

When she reached Znamenka Street she hid her red pass. She was surrounded by cadets who took her into the school to the orderly officer.

"I want to work as a nurse. My father was killed in the German war, when Samsonov retreated. I've got two brothers in Cossack units on the Don. I'm here with a younger sister."

"Very good, excellent. We're very glad. In our hard struggle for great Russia we are glad to have the sincere help of every noble patriot. And you are the daughter of an officer. Come this way, please."

They showed her into the drawing room and brought her tea.

The orderly officer said to his subordinate:

"Stepanov, dress yourself as a worker. Make your way to Pokrovka. Here's the address. Find out all the details about the girl who's sitting here."

Stepanov went and put on an overcoat with a bloody hole in the chest that had just been taken off a worker who had been killed. He put on his trousers, torn boots and cap and in the twilight set out for Pokrovka.

A ragged, red-headed man, whose eyes rolled strangely, told him about her.

"Yes, there's some woman living in Number Two. With a little girl. Some bourgeois."

"Where is she now?"

"She hasn't been home since morning. She's probably been arrested. Captain's daughter, she can't be any good. What do you want her for, anyway?"

"She had a maid who comes from our village. I wanted to see her, that's all. So long."

At night, when the cadets returned from their posts, they treated the girl with the greatest attention. They got cakes and sweets for her. One of them began playing noisily on the piano, another dropped on to his knee and, laughing, offered her a bouquet.

"We'll soon dispose of those blackguards. We've already given them a good lesson. Tomorrow night we'll attack from Smolensk Market and then you'll see the feathers fly."

Next morning they took her to the hospital to dress wounds.

As they passed a whitewashed wall something attracted her attention: against the wall lay the body of a worker in a pink cotton shirt, his head thrown back, boots with worn soles lying in the mud, a dark hole over his left eye.

"A spy," snapped the cadet walking past without looking, "we caught him."

All day the girl worked in the hospital gently and

skilfully and the wounded looked gratefully into her grey eyes with their long dark lashes.

"Thank you, sister."

On the second night she asked for permission to go home.

"Where can you go? Don't you know it's dangerous? They're watching every corner. As soon as you get out of our zone those blackguards will grab you and shoot you without any talk."

"I'll show them my documents. I'm a peaceful citizen. I can't stay away. I have a little sister there. God knows what's happening to her, I'm terribly worried."

"Yes, the little sister. That's true. All right I'll give you two cadets as escort."

"No, no, no..." she said in a frightened voice, holding out her hands, "I'll go alone ... alone.... I'm not afraid."

He looked at her closely.

"Y-yes.... All right.... Off you go."

"Pink shirt, and a dark hole over his eye... head thrown back..." ran through her mind.

The girl went out of the gates and was immediately immersed in an ocean of darkness—not a sign or a sound of anything.

From the school she passed diagonally across Arbat Square to the Arbat Gates. A little circle of darkness went with her in which she could distinguish her own figure. Nothing else—she was alone in the whole wide world.

She was not afraid. Only inside, she was all tensed up.

In her childhood she would sometimes go into her father's room when he was away, take down the guitar that hung on a wall-carpet over his bed, would sit down with her feet tucked up under her and pluck a string; then she would turn the peg pulling up the string tighter and tighter, the note got thinner and more plaintive un-

til it became unbearable. A thin ting-ting-ting, a spasm that pierced the very heart. Then it would break, it had reached its limit.... And the shivers would run down her back and there would be little beads of sweat on her forehead.... All this gave her an exquisite pleasure that was not to be compared with anything else.... Vaguely she could distinguish her dark figure.

Suddenly she stretched out her hand. The wall of a house. The horror that spread through her whole body brought with it a weakening languor and the sweat stood out in little beads as it had done then, in her childhood. The wall of a house—there should have been the railings of the boulevard here. That meant that she had lost her way. Well, it didn't really matter, she would find the right direction. Her teeth chattered from a fit of shivering deep down inside her. Somebody bent over her and whispered:

"This is the beginning of the end... don't you understand? You think you have only lost your way, but it's the begin...."

She made a superhuman effort to remember: Znamenka Street on the right, the boulevard on the left.... Obviously she had got somewhere between them. She held out her hand and felt a post. Telegraph pole? With a fast-beating heart she knelt down and felt along the ground, her fingers felt cold, wet iron.... The boulevard railings. The weight immediately fell from her. She got up calmly and... shivered. Everything was in motion all round her—vaguely, indistinctly disappearing and reappearing. Everything was moving, the buildings, the walls, the trees. The tram standards, the tram-lines all moved blood-red in the blood-red darkness. And the dull red darkness moved. And the low-hanging clouds blazed blood-red.

She went in the direction from which came this silent, fluttering gleam. She went towards the Nikitskiye Gates.

It was strange that so far nobody had called to her or stopped her. She knew that in the blackness of gateways and doorways, at the corners, sentries were hidden who did not take their eyes off her. She was in full view, she walked along lit up by the red blaze, she walked in the middle of it.

She walked calmly in one hand holding the pass given by the Whites, in the other hand that of the Reds. Whoever called to her she would show the necessary pass. The streets were empty, there was nothing but the mournfully red, silent blaze. There was a tremendous conflagration at the Nikitskiye Gates. Furious tongues of flame pierced the low-hanging red clouds over which rolled masses of red smoke. A huge building was lit through and through with a blazing, blinding light. In this blinding incandescence everything was trembling madly, was ferociously whirled up to the clouds; only the beams, rails and walls stood motionless, like black skeletons. And the holes where the windows had been showed the same searing light.

The sparks of a long-tailed, red bird carried up to the clouds, and the crackling and white-hot whispering drowned whatever else was going on around that building.

The girl turned round. The city was plunged in darkness. The city with its countless buildings, belfries, squares, theatres, brothels—had disappeared. There was nothing but impenetrable darkness.

In the whole of that space there was silence and in the silence, mystery: something was about to happen, something which could not be named. But the silence was supreme and in that silence there was anticipation. The girl was terror-stricken.

The heat was unbearable. She crossed the street diagonally. She had no sooner reached a dark corner than

a squat figure appeared out of the darkness, the light reflected on his bayonet.

"Where are you going? Who are you?"

She stopped and looked. She had forgotten which pass was in which hand. A second's hesitation dragged out.... The muzzle of a rifle dropped to the level of her chest.

What was the matter? She had wanted to hold out her right hand and suddenly, without knowing what she was doing, she held out her left hand and spasmodically opened it.

In her hand lay the pass issued by the cadets.

The sentry put down his rifle and with clumsy, disobedient fingers smoothed out the pass. She trembled, a tiny little shiver such as she had never experienced before. Behind her a shower of sparks burst out of the conflagration, casting a flickering light.... The cadets' pass lay on his calloused palm... upside down....

"Uh... he's illiterate...."

"Here."

She crumpled that accursed piece of paper.

"Where are you going?" he called after her.

"To headquarters.... To the Soviet...."

"Stick to the side streets or they'll get you."

She was met with great attention at headquarters: the information she had brought them was very valuable. All of them talked in a friendly way with her, asking her questions. The man in the leather jacket, the one with the consumptive face, smiled tenderly at her.

"Well done, little girl. Only watch your step."

In the evening, when the firing died down, she made her way back to Arbat Street. More and more wounded were all the time arriving at the hospital from the surrounding district. The attack launched by the cadets from Smolensk Market had been beaten back; there had been losses.

All night long the girl with a tired, worn-out face gave the wounded men water, bound their wounds and the wounded followed her movements with gratitude in their eyes. At dawn a cadet without a cap and dressed in worker's clothes, burst into the hospital; he was dishevelled and his face was contorted.

He ran straight up to the girl.

"That... bitch... sold us out...."

She staggered back, white as a sheet, then her face was flushed with the flush of death as she screamed:

"You... you are killing workers. They are fighting their way out of their awful lot.... I have.... I don't know how to use weapons but I've killed you...."

They led her out to the whitewashed wall and she lay obediently with two bullets in her heart on the same place where the worker in the cotton shirt had lain. And until they took her away her grey, long-lashed eyes stared constantly at the grim, threatening October sky.

1926